What Does Masculinity Mean to You: Trans Males Creating Identities of Possibilities

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Abstract

A. Carter Sickels. What Does Masculinity Mean to You: Trans Males Creating Identities of Possibilities
(Under the direction of Glenn Hinson, Patricia Sawin, and John Howard)

This thesis addresses the multiple ways that trans-identified males experience gender, masculinity, and identity. In this ethnographic project, seven trans-identified males living in the Triangle of North Carolina speak about their daily experiences and share their personal narratives to reveal diverse masculine identities. My thesis argues that these trans-identified males are creating an emergent, fluid, imaginative space of being that exists outside of the boundaries of the gender binary.

Dedicated to Chase, Luke, Mo, Neeve, Ryan, Stephen, and Tate, who shared their stories with me with such openness and welcomed me with kindness, and to the many others in the community who are not included in these pages but who have also inspired me by living their lives with such courage and commitment.

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Chapter One
Trans-Males Creating Identities of Possibilities

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On a clear summer night, Tate[1] and I were outside on the patio at Fuse, a bar in Chapel Hill. Most of the students were gone for the summer break; a few customers were sitting at the rickety tables, drinking and enjoying the night. Indy rock played from the speakers. Tate was dressed in his usual attire—baggy shorts, a T-shirt, baseball hat, and round-framed glasses. Tate is stocky and about 5'3", with a young face. As he says, he is often read as a "12 year old boy," though he is 32. I was wearing jeans and a layer of two T-shirts, despite the heat. Over cold PBRs, Tate and I discussed gender, identity, and sexuality.

As the bar started to get more crowded, a bearded guy wearing athletic gear, in his 20s, and tall and thick in the arms, came over to chat. Tate and he had been talking earlier in the night. Tate talks to everyone. He's friendly and outgoing, and has an infectious laugh. Tate introduced us, and Joe* asked for a cigarette. The three of us made small talk—mostly Joe told us about how he tried not to drink too much because he didn't want to get into any more trouble.

Then, Tate said, "Well, Joe, it was real nice seeing you, but I got to get back to talking to my friend here. We haven't seen each other in a while."

"All right, thanks for the cigarette," Joe said. "I hope you ladies have a good night."

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[1] My consultants all feel comfortable in using their names for this project. I decided to use only first names, in order to provide them with some amount of privacy and protection.

* I do change the names of people who are not my consultants, or who come up in conversation. An asterisk will denote whenever I've changed a name.

A quiet tension tightened like a wire between me and Tate. I looked at Tate, then down at my beer. Then Tate said, "Now Joe." I looked up. Tate was smiling. "Now Joe, do we look like a couple of ladies to you?"

Joe looked surprised. Then hurt. "Well, then what would you want me to say? What am I supposed to say?"

"Well," Tate said, leaning back in his chair. "How about 'y'all'? I mean, you are in the South. You could just say 'y'all.'"

"All right, all right," he said, laughing.

After Joe had walked away, I felt a sense of relief, but also admiration. "That was good."

"That's what you've got to do sometimes, Carter. You just have to tell people. You have to teach people."

I had only been in Chapel Hill for a year; I'd moved here from New York, and with a typical New Yorker's attitude, feared that I'd basically have to live a quiet, closeted life. Instead, I met Tate and others—a group of diverse, vibrant, transgender and gender nonconforming people, many of whom call the South home.

I open with this somewhat mundane scene to illustrate how trans-people must claim and articulate their identities on a daily basis. For trans-people, how we move and how we look, how we are read by outsiders and insiders, and how we feel about ourselves, are shifting but real experiences that are often rendered invisible or misunderstood by a society that is steeped in heteronormative gender roles.

That night, Tate and I ordered another round, and continued our conversation, moving through various topics, such as testosterone, pronouns, bathrooms, and first names. In addition to Tate, I've met other transgender people in the Chapel Hill-Durham area who

have talked openly to me about their lives and experiences, and have also created a space in which I learn from them, and feel comfortable in expressing my own experiences. Each of the stories is different and the voices are diverse; and yet the conversation is inclusive, open-ended, and ongoing.

Through conversations, observation, and participation, I have come closer to understanding the complex and liberating ways that trans-identified males, some of them friends of mine, experience gender, masculinity, and identity. This project addresses how trans-identified males, both those who are medically transitioning and those who choose not to take testosterone or undergo surgery, are creating an emergent, fluid, imaginative space of being that exists outside of the boundaries of the gender binary. By constructing and performing their diverse masculine identities, these individuals challenge the notion of a singular transgender identity, and reveal instead a continuum of possibilities. In other words, through the revelation of their personal narratives and daily experiences (such as asserting pronoun preferences, dealing with outsider challenges, or choosing to go in the "men's" or "women's" bathroom), trans-identified males construct a winding path that passes through and beyond the entrenched gender binary, a binary that not only prescribes a male-female dichotomy, but also dictates a particular masculinized path for transgender males that "fits" within its heteronormative architecture. The trans-identified males I have met instead are carving out something that is more complex, open, and fluid, a space that breathes with possibilities.

For this project, I have conducted an ethnography with trans-male identified people living in the north-central Piedmont of North Carolina. The seven individuals who have served as my consultants live in small towns and cities in North Carolina's Triangle. Many of them come from different places, but all have chosen, for different reasons, to call this

home. Although some of the people with whom I am speaking do not know each other, I believe they nonetheless constitute a community, brought together by their diverse yet overlapping experiences, and by their mutual desire to be recognized by others. My consultants experience very different lives, but commonalities bring us together, whether in physical, virtual, or imagined spaces.

For this project, I will use the terms "transgender males," "trans-male identified," and "trans-guys" interchangeably, but mostly I will rely on the phrase "trans-identified males," in order to encompass a wide array of identities that my consultants claim, including "transgender male," "boy," and "genderqueer." Language in the transgender community changes regularly as we attempt to express our multiple identities in a language that favors binaries and dichotomies. The sheer volume of possibilities in "naming" one's identity speaks to the destabilization, movement, and fluidity of this transgender-male space.

Though many of my consultants have struggled with self-understanding, recognition, presentation, and inclusion, these are not stories of sadness, desperation, or self-despising. Instead, through narrating their loss, pain, and struggles, my consultants illuminate the way their gender identities have empowered them, and how they are reclaiming expressions of self that society has denied them. Thus, my consultants' personal narratives will be at the heart of this ethnography.

One aim of my project is to convey this community's rich understandings and expressions of themselves. Although portrayals of transgender people have increased in mainstream society within the last decade (a shift that has helped to heighten visibility and may potentially help to secure rights), the media generally present only one way of understanding or expressing a transgender identity. News stories and television shows typically frame the stories of transgender persons as before/after narratives that express the

"problem" of "being trapped in the wrong body." This singular linear narrative—with its clear beginning and ending—silences, erases, and excludes many trans-identified people who don't share this story. Without more documentation and validation of the diversity of transgender identities and communities, transgender people will continue to be blanketed under generalizations—and thus, will be easier to oppress. Trans-identified people face discrimination in healthcare, housing, and employment, as well as the threat of being rejected by their families and being victimized by hate crimes. Transgender people also must deal with day-to-day anxieties in a society that perpetuates a gender binary system: "do I check Male or Female on this application," or, "which bathroom do I use?" An active, growing trans-movement is working to dispel misconceptions and stereotypes; to fight for equality, recognition and inclusion; and to secure legal rights for trans people. In order for public attitudes and legal protection to change, the multiple voices of trans-identified people must be heard.

Queer scholarship has helped to de-stabilize categories of gender and sexuality, with Judith Butler's theory about gender performativity serving as a groundbreaking text (1990). Since then, Queer and Transgender Studies has grown as a discipline, while much recent scholarship on transgender communities has emerged within Cultural Studies, Anthropology, and Sociology. The problem with most such scholarship, though, is that it does not address the lived experiences of trans-identified people; rarely does the reader get a full picture of their lives, identities, experiences, and expression. Folklore Studies offers a critical lens that could address this lack, and in so doing enrich the field of queer scholarship. Folklore's emphasis on emergent identities as created through experience, performance, and expression, and its embracing of the significance of the "everyday," critically inform my

approach to this work, and will aid me in conveying this queer space of masculine possibilities that trans-identified males create and claim.

Literature Review

The scholarship of queer and gender studies provides a foundation for my thesis. Foucault's ideas on the relationships of power, knowledge, discourse, and sexuality (1988, 1990) influenced the development of queer theory, and informed Judith Butler, whose *Gender Trouble* (1990), followed by *Bodies That Matter* (1993), were ground-breaking in the advent of Queer Studies. Butler's theories undid feminist essentialist theory, arguing that "foundational categories of identity—the binary of sex, gender, and the body—can be shown as productions that create the effect of the natural, the original, and the inevitable" (1990: xxxi). Butler opened the door to "troubl[ing] the gender categories that support gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality" (1990: xxx); her argument that 'gender is performed' continues to be the basis for gender and sexuality studies.

Butler's "Doing Justice to Someone" (2004) is particularly helpful in understanding how entrenched the gender binary is in society. In this essay, Butler speaks to how, in order to undergo reassignment surgery, one must articulate a gender essentialist narrative: "someone who comes in with a sense of the gender as changeable will have a more difficult time convincing psychiatrists and doctors to perform the surgery. In San Francisco, FTM candidates actually practice the narrative of gender essentialism that they are required to perform before they go in to see the doctors" (2004: 71). This "accepted" narrative involves a person claiming that he always knew he was a boy and that he felt trapped in the wrong body. The narratives of my consultants challenge and undo this grand narrative, resisting hegemonic control over their identities. Although certainly some of my consultants always "knew" they were boys, or feel certain levels of body dysphoria, all of them also consider

gender to be fluid and unstable—and continue to create their own paths, their own ways of being.

The '90s was an active time for transgender studies. In addition to queer theory scholars, creative voices such as Kate Bornstein (1994) and Leslie Feinberg (1993; 1996) advocated transgender visibility and/or the emergence of "gender outlaws." Another important change during this time—and one that continues to even a greater level today—was that trans-identified people took an active role in creating this scholarship, taking the language of the medical, legal, and scholarly communities, which had often been used against them, to reclaim and affirm their transgender identities and rights. Activism has often been closely linked to queer and transgender scholarship, and this relationship is still crucial, as seen in many of the articles in *The Transgender Studies Reader* (2006). The editors of this work, Susan Stryker and Stephen White, present transgender scholarship from before the 1960s, when scholars used a medical or scientific lens, alongside more recent scholarship, which includes articles about racism in trans communities, and transgender masculinities, in addition to many other subjects. The authors of the majority of the articles are transgender; among them is scholar Jason Cromwell, an anthropologist who is also FTM.

Cromwell's "Queering the Binaries: Transsituated Identities, Bodies, and Sexualities" (2006) is particularly useful for my studies. Using qualitative research methods and participant observation, Cromwell presents the voices of FTMs who reveal the complexities of gender identities and sexualities. Cromwell argues that transgender identities disrupt the gender binary, and shatter the Western myth that "body-equals-sex-equals-gender-equals-identity" (2006: 509). He frames the article by revealing how his subjects (re)construct sexuality, body, and identity, in contrast to the medical and psychological hegemonic discourses. What I find limiting about Cromwell's study is the sociological/anthropological

lens he employs: he uses snippets of quotes to create a diverse, multiple voice, but the people, for the most part, are absent; this removed quality of the text distances readers. Folklore, in contrast, offers the opportunity not only to give page space to the multiple voices, but also to more fully incorporate the owners of those voices into the text. Folklore's emphasis on performance and expression will be key to my project, and will aid me in providing in-depth, textured understandings of my consultants' narratives.

Much queer scholarship and media presentation on transgender communities and individuals focuses on urban spaces, typically in the Northeast or West Coast. The stories from those places differ from many of the stories I encountered here in the Piedmont, leading me to search for works that address queer communities in other kinds of spaces. In the chapter, "The Brandon Archive," in *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), Judith Halberstam examines presentations of transgender people who live in rural places; in particular, Halberstam examines the films made about Brandon Teena, the transgender male who was murdered in 1993 in Nebraska. Halberstam's argument that the media typically presents a transgender narrative of tragedy incited me to consider the other dominant transgender narratives that tend to erase other stories. Halberstam challenges artists, scholars, and historians to "collect" more stories, narratives, and documentation about transgender lives in rural areas, to build an archive in which the stories "stretch far beyond the usual tales of love and hate and the various narratives of accommodation" to tell "a different story" about race, desire, class, and geography (2005:46). I read Halberstam's argument as stretching across regions, urging that we must present specific and multiple stories of transgender people who live not only in rural areas, but also in places *different* from what we generally consider to be "the" queer cities.

One such place is "the queer South." Although the South per se is not a major thrust of my project, the region *is* a part of my consultants' lives. To enrich my understanding of this place, I turned to two notable scholarly works that consider the queer South. *Men Like That* (1999) by John Howard examines queer life in small cities, towns, and rural settings in Mississippi from 1945 to the 1985, "[i]n contrast to urban-centered and identity-focused studies of American gay and lesbian history" (1999: xiv). Using a historical lens, Howard focuses on the lives of "sexual and gender nonconformity, specifically male homosexualities and male-to-female transgender sexualities" in Mississippi, arguing that although these individuals were excluded from the portrayal of queer life in America, queer culture and queer sex very much existed—even flourished at times—in these Mississippi landscapes (1999: xiv). Howard relied on archival holdings and consulted or conducted over 50 interviews to trace the expression of queer sexuality in a southern landscape. Rejecting popular and scholarly depictions of the South as an inhospitable or impossible space for queer lives, Howard argues that "queer sex in Mississippi was not rare. Men-desiring-men were neither wholly isolated nor invisible" (1999: xiii). Howard interweaves his analysis and description of the social, political, and cultural context with narratives from the interviews to construct a rich portrayal that depicts how "queer acts . . . were well incorporated into the structures of daily life in Mississippi" (1999: 306).

I also admire Howard's refusal to gloss over talk about sex, which is often excluded or toned down in scholarly work; this especially seems true in Folklore. Following Howard's example, I have invited my consultants to speak freely about bodies and sex. Howard underscores his argument that queer men in Mississippi are "crafting lives of determination and grit" (1999: xxiii) with the understanding that genders and sexualities are fluid, a connection between content and contextualization that applies to my own work.

Similarly, in *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (2008), E. Patrick Johnson documents the resilience and determination of African American queer men who call the South home. Like Howard, Johnson sheds light on a population that has been misunderstood or ignored by scholarship. The aim of his book is:

> to fill a void in the historical accounts of radicalized sexual minorities in the South; to call into question the construction of the South as inhospitable to African American gay men; to account for the way that black gay men negotiate their sexual and racial identity with their southern cultural and religious identity; and to highlight the ways in which black gay men build and maintain community through southern culture forms that, on the surface, appear to be antigay. (2008: 3-4)

Johnson documents these important lives while also revealing how queer African American men—through their resilience and self-understanding—create a home within the South, queering a space that is steeped in racism and heteronormativity. I find a kinship in both Howard and Johnson's portrayals of marginalized groups who, through strength, subversion, and fluidity, create a space of queer possibilities. I also turn to these works for their emphasis on their consultants' voices and narratives.

While these studies are important for their examination of queer men the South, and also for their inclusion of transgender individuals, no studies focus entirely on a transgender identities. The closest is the work of anthropologist David Valentine, who explores transgender identities in *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (2007). Valentine focuses on a group of black trans-women in New York City who belong to a transgender support group, yet never actually use the term "transgender" in describing themselves.

Folklore's focus on lived experiences, performance and identity offers a crucial addition to transgender studies. However, within the field of Folklore, there is no work on trans-identified people, and very little about queer, or lesbian or gay experiences. The foundational work in Folklore's exploration of queer identity is Jeff Goodwin's *More Man*

Than You'll Ever Be: Gay Folklore and Acculturation in Middle America (1989), in which Goodwin examines the folklore of gay men through verbal and nonverbal communication, humor, and drag. In Goodwin's view, Folklore Studies rises as a likely field for studying the LGBT community: "rejected by the larger culture, gay people turned to their subculture, which—especially through its folklore—could serve as a source of strength and as a way of developing a surrogate system of social support" (1989: 2). Four years later, *New York Folklore* reiterated Goodwin's call for more folkloristic work on LGBT communities in the special issue "Prejudice and Pride: Lesbian and Gay Traditions in America" (1993). This issue promotes the study of queer folklore, with an overarching framework of celebration, visibility and pride. The editors propose: "A society is defined at least as clearly as by what it excludes as by what it exalts. And yet it is only relatively recently that humanistic scholarship has turned any noticeable degree of attention to gay and lesbian matters. Folklorists in particular, who might have been expected to set the trend, have instead lagged rather far behind" (1993: 1). Surprisingly, since then, only a few articles have been published on queer folklore, although the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Gay Folklife* may signal a welcoming shift in this trend. Still, the question arises: Has Folklore Studies excluded queer voices, or are folklorists publishing their research in other disciplines, such as Cultural Studies or Queer Studies?

Although folklorists tend to work with marginalized communities and often engage with these communities as activists, shadows of conservatism still cloak the field; indeed, one might argue that studies of "traditional" communities inherently perpetuate heteronormativity. Amy Shuman's discussion in "Dismantling Local Culture" illuminates the problem of "marking" the marginalized group while privileging the "unmarked" group, such that the unmarked group "appear[s] to be a natural category" (1993: 346). By presenting

heterosexual and gender conforming individuals as "unmarked" groups, does Folklore then perpetuate a heteronormative perspective? On the other hand, Folklore Studies' foundational studies of emergent identities and performance lays the groundwork for studying questions of identity (Bauman 1977; Abrahams 2003; Sawin 2002). Furthermore, Folklore's close lens on the everyday has helped me to depict my consultants' expressions of masculinity and their affirmation of identity, which are based not on special events, but on daily routines (Berger and Del Negro 2004). I also demonstrate how their daily actions are in fact forms of resistance to the hegemonic binary (de Certeau 1984).

Another way that Folklore contributes to this study is its problematization of the concept of "community" and "group." As individuals who may not spend time together or even know each other, the group of transgender males that form the focus of this thesis challenges the traditional definitions of community, and perhaps resembles what Dorothy Noyes' calls the "imagined community" (2003). This group differs from the traditional understanding that members of a community live in the same vicinity and regularly interact with each other. Noyes expands the traditional definition of "group" by considering the many layers of networks and connections that construct a community, while also pointing out the fragility of these connections (2003). My consultants experience community through a variety of networks. The larger, looser, Internet-based network of trans-identified males provides an important source of community for many of my consultants, in which strangers share knowledge and experiences with each other. But the local community provides opportunity for face-to-face interactions, and, perhaps more importantly, underscores the feeling that one is not alone. Noyes describes the reconciliation of what she terms networks and communities:

> the community is in no way independent of the network . . . .The community of the social imaginary coexists in a dialectical tension with the empirical world of day-to-

> day network contacts. The imagined community offers a focus for comparison and desire, and, at the same time, is itself subject to re-visionings in the light of everyday experience. This productive tension is the complex object we denote with the word *group*. (2003:33)

The different nodes of contact for trans-identified males create a type of experimental community, made up of both conceptual and face-to-face experiences. Though several of my consultants do not necessarily feel they are part of a solid transgender community here, nearly all of them stress the importance of living in a place where there is support, recognition, and commonality.

Methodology

My thesis is based on ethnographic work with a transgender community in North Carolina. My research for this project is interview-based, focusing on conversations with seven consultants. These conversations delve into questions of identity, preferences about pronouns and names, meanings linked to being masculine or male, choices about medically transitioning, bathroom-choice anxieties, relationships to bodies and sexualities, and "coming out" narratives. Much of the material for my thesis comes from these recorded discussions. I also draw upon unrecorded field notes and from experiences that I shared with my consultants—such as the opening vignette about hanging out a bar with Tate. In terms of structure, both *Men Like That* and *Sweet Tea* are important models. For example, Johnson turns to the interviews and oral histories that he conducted for the bulk of his text, providing a short analysis at the beginning of each section; the way that he divides his book by themes offers a useful model for expressing the multi-layered voices of consultants. Furthermore, Johnson's guiding assertion that "framing these narratives and the ethnographic process as performance destabilizes notions of *the* truth and focuses more on 'truth' as experienced in the moment of the storytelling event" also addresses my concern with emphasizing the collaborative process of my work (2008:10). I am offering no single answer, no grand

singular truth; rather, I present the voices of my consultants, which portray possibilities that are often riddled with contradictions and multiple interpretations.

The literary style of Howard's rich narrative and analysis also informs my work. In this thesis, I interweave my consultants' narratives into the text, sometimes to show the full scenes of our emergent dialogue, and to provide a full description of my consultants as individuals. My ethnography synthesizes my voice, my consultants' voices, "thick" description, conversations, experiences, and narrative in an attempt to create what Jeff Titon calls the "knowing text" (2003:81), in order to create a fuller, richer ethnography that is not only limited to my interpretation. Furthermore, Elaine Lawless's *Women Escaping Violence: Empowerment Through Narrative* (2001) serves an example of how an ethnographer can gracefully write about her personal and layered connections to the stories of her consultants. I also turn to humanistic ethnographies such as Henry Glassie's *Stars of Ballymenone* (2006)—rich in detail and character description, not overwrought with theory, and written with compassion—as models for my work.

I structure the thesis in terms of topics that arose from discussions with my consultants. Although I also weave in analysis, questions, supplementary research, and descriptive writing, I feel it is important to give my consultants "room to speak." The transgender community is one that is often overlooked in popular and academic discourse; further, whenever queer scholarship focuses on this community, the individuals' stories and experiences are typically buried under theoretical speak and jargon. Although I turn to this theory to help me create a framework and to inform this work, as a folklorist I feel it is crucial to create a space for my consultants to describe their experiences in their own language. Therefore the three core chapters present my consultants words and explanations, along with my interpretations.

The three central chapters examine how trans-identified males construct their identities and masculinities in the practice of their everyday lives. In Chapter 2 my consultants explain how they identify and narrate stories of their emerging trans-identities; in these "coming out" stories, they actually describe more of a "coming into" process. They offer insights about the way language figures into their identities, the fluidity of gender, and the possibilities of masculinity.

Chapter 3 turns to the subject of bodies and how they connect to the emergence of identity. My consultants' multi-layered experiences undo the master narratives typically associated with trans-experiences, and instead show how the body encourages a path of possibilities. My consultants speak about top surgery, binding, T, and sex, articulating how their bodies relate to the construction of their trans-identities.

In Chapter 4, I consider how my consultants engage with a society that operates on a binary system, and how outsider (mis)readings may challenge or affirm their gender-identities. My consultants talk about everyday experiences that question their gender identities, such as using public bathrooms, while also showing how they claim space for themselves. This chapter considers trans-males' daily presentations of their gender identities and the ways that others' view them, and how these experiences create a complicated construction of identity.

Chapter 5 concludes my thesis and simultaneously asks how society must change in order for trans-males to feel comfortable, recognized, and legally protected. My consultants, in creating these new spaces of possibility, are inviting mainstream society to let go of their ties to the gender binary and to step *into* these new spaces.

Appendix I provides short biographies of my consultants. This section also includes photographs, both portraits and candid shots, of some my consultants; these images show

them in their home, or in a place where they feel comfortable, in an attempt to portray their "everyday" lives. Appendix II consists of a conversation with Tate about our experience playing on a football team together, in which he addresses most of the issues in this thesis. Because this segment of our conversation evokes so many important questions about identity, fluidity, presentation, community, and diverse masculinities, I wanted to present it in its entirety, with little commentary from me.

While the thesis's core chapters focus on my consultants, I also include my own experiences of claiming my trans-identity throughout the thesis. In addition, three vignettes, reconstructed from journal entries, detail my own specific experiences. It is my hope that these more personal sections reveal not only my own journey in gender and sexuality identities, but also how my interactions and discussions with my consultants have impacted my own understanding of self and offered me a supportive community.

Demographics

My consultants consist of seven individuals who span the ages of 27 to 45, are Caucasian, and who were assigned female at birth. With the exception of two consultants who grew up working-class, all of my consultants come from middle-class backgrounds and are college-educated; one has two Master's degrees, and one is currently pursuing his Bachelor's. Five of the seven initially moved to the area to attend the University of North Carolina. My consultants' jobs range from social work to overseeing a grant-funded project that promotes leadership for youth with disabilities to managing an independent pet supply store. Of my seven consultants, none grew up in the Triangle, and only two were born in North Carolina. One was raised in the Midwest, while the others spent either all or the majority of their childhoods in the South; nonetheless, only two explicitly identify as southern, and another identifies as Appalachian.

I found my consultants through word of mouth, through my network of friends, or at queer events; I emailed many others who did not respond or who politely turned me down. I had had hoped that this project would be more racially diverse and include the narratives and experiences of African American and Latino transgender males; this inclusion would have prompted different and important questions regarding masculinity, race, and the South. Despite my efforts, however, I did not meet any trans-identified males of color in Chapel Hill, Carrboro, or Durham (even though Durham is 49% African-American). Several consultants commented on the lack of racial diversity in the queer community. "We all mix together," Tate said, but "we are racially segregated" (2009b). The racial divide across the Triangle's queer community is an important subject for future scholarship; similarly, African-American or Latino transgender males' experiences deserve more attention from scholars.[2]

Although the experiences and narratives of transgender females in the area also deserve close attention, this particular work focuses only on transgender-male identified people, whose experiences—as diverse as they might be—present clear commonalities and patterns in identity-shaping and performing. Another important feature shared by my consultants is their comfort in talking about their transgender identities: all of my consultants are "out," to varying degrees, and all are involved in some way with queer culture or community. Only one of my consultants, the least "out," seriously considers living full-time as a heterosexual male in a mainstream community. This project would have taken a different turn if I had also spoken to "stealth" individuals (who live full-time as men in mainstream society and do not disclose their transgender identity). Initially, I hoped to include some of these individuals in my research, but was unsuccessful in reaching them. All

[2] The documentary film *Still Black: A Portrait of Black Transmen* (2008), directed by Kortney Ryan Ziegler, is an exception; the film explores the lives of six black trans-men who narrate their experiences.

of my consultants felt comfortable talking about bodies, sex, and experiences in a way that may have not been possible with those living "stealth."

My consultants vary in how many years they have been living as transgender; some have been doing so for only a couple of years, while others have done so for six to ten years. But most of them began to understand themselves as *different* on some level before they actually articulated their identity as transgender. I hesitate to contain their experiences by focusing on chronological time, since people define transitioning in different ways: some begin counting from the day they changed their name; others consider T injections as the starting point; still others assert no clear beginnings or endings.

Place and Community

"I do feel that there's a disproportionably large number of trans-identified folk in a fairly small radius. I can think of 10 or maybe 15 off the top of my head, which is, if you think about it, that's a lot for a fairly small queer community." – Tate (2009b)

Durham, Raleigh, and Chapel Hill make up the three defining points of the Triangle, with three major universities anchoring the area. The Triangle is politically liberal and progressive, and not representative of the majority of the South. All of my consultants live in the Chapel Hill-Durham area, with four residing in Carrboro, a liberal town with a population of 17,000. Carrboro is just west of Chapel Hill, and features a farmer's market, a co-op, and a variety of "foodie" restaurants. The queer community in Carrboro/Chapel Hill integrates with the straight community—everyone goes to the same bars and the same cafés. "A gay bar doesn't work here, it's too narrowly defined," said Tate (2009b). The small-town, college atmosphere combined with the liberal attitude creates a feeling of ease for many of my consultants. Durham, east of Chapel Hill, provides a more urban atmosphere, and consultants who live there emphasize its diversity, along with the feeling of small-town atmosphere within the queer community. The trans-communities in the Chapel Hill-

Carrboro and Durham areas remain in some ways distinctly separate from each other; nonetheless, many trans-people from both areas know each other or have seen each other around. Queer events—such as lectures at UNC, monthly dances at the Pinhook in Durham, or drag-king shows—draw queer people from each area. "Every gay will go to a gay event," explains Tate (2009b). In Carrboro, one can attend bi-weekly support group meetings for trans-identified people.

The trans-community in the Chapel Hill-Durham area is emergent and experimental—a loose set of networks and connections between people that includes face-to-face interactions and also extends into the virtual world. Trans-identified males often turn to the Internet for information and support; one can watch videos on YouTube about the effects of testosterone, connect with others via chat rooms, or look up reviews on chest binders. "I think about people who talk about 10 to 15 years ago, when there was nothing, and where did you learn that, you know?" asked Mo (2009b). The Internet offers trans-people across the world support and connection; here in the Triangle, trans-identified males also create a physical, local community. Although many of the community members may not spend significant time with each other or even know each other by name, social and academic events on transgender or queer issues tend to draw a crowd of transgender males. The *recognition* of a community provides a source of stability, comfort, and validity for many transgender males in the area. I would argue that even more supportive than the actual support group meetings is the implicit *understanding* that other trans-identified males live in the area. Whether or not one spends his time with other trans-identified males, he recognizes that he is not alone; the community creates an architecture of support and connection.

The majority of my consultants identify as queer, or at least feel connected in some way to the queer community. The Triangle area has a strong LGBT community, but as Tate

said, the community is actually "pockets of communities," not a central entity. Of my consultants, I would characterize only three of them as friends; most the others know of each other or are friendly with one another, but do not interact beyond social events; a few have never met. But the loose recognition ties people together. Mo explained to me the importance of knowing he was not alone when he began thinking about transitioning: "I call them the 'Carrboro people.' Just a few you see around town, or at Open Eye. You just kind of say 'hi,' people you sort of know"(2009b). Tate, who feels strongly attached to the community(ies) in the area, gives his impression:

> And so I think that there is a trans community in that sense in that
> there are lots of people who know who each other,
> who are connected,
> who see each other at shows,
> who respect each other's genders,
> and who are supportive
> in that way.
> But at the same time it's *completely* disconnected
> and it's not driven by a single united politic based on gender or gender identity.
> There's not like a—it's much more of a
> queer community with a trans component,
> in my opinion. (2010d)

Instead of depicting the community as fragmented or splintered, I draw on Tate's description to characterize the community as a web, with strands intersecting and supporting each other. The community in a sense parallels the formation of the trans-identities of my consultants—emergent, fluid, and spangled with possibilities.

Finding the Story

I like to believe the best stories, the ones that matter, are the ones that find you, although you may not understand why until later. I had been considering several different groups for my thesis project, and at first had resisted writing about the trans-identified male community. Yet somewhere along the way, the fine line between me finding my work and the work finding me vanished. In her ethnography about abused women in *Women Escaping*

Violence, Elaine Lawless writes that she did not realize until later, toward the end of the book, the extent of her personal stake in the project: "I believe we are drawn to life work that bears meaning for us" (2001:3).

I knew, in a sense, why I was drawn to the trans-community, but it wasn't until I found myself in the middle of the project that I realized how much I was learning from my consultants. Two years ago I left New York City, where I'd been settled for nine years, to enter the Folklore program at the University of Chapel Hill. Some time before I left, I made a barely legible note in my journal to "find a transgender group in North Carolina." Why didn't I seek out transgender communities when I was living in the city, where I easily could have met other trans-identified males? I can only say that I was not ready. For at least six years, I'd been more comfortable presenting as male, but I didn't yet know how to claim my identity. I'd been wanting to change my name for close to seven years, but I could not find the space to do it—or the courage. I knew for a long time that I wasn't comfortable identifying as a dyke, but I didn't know how to step away from this identity. I'd been living in New York for nine years, settled into a certain kind of life, with the same partner for the last two years: I didn't know how to make the changes. But I knew I needed to leave, that something was pulling me.

After living in Chapel Hill for a couple of months, I became friends with Stephen, and he introduced me to the queer community and to other trans-identified people in the area. The next summer, after I'd been in North Carolina for a year, I attended the Philadelphia Trans-Health Conference where, for the first time, I introduced myself as Carter. When I came back to North Carolina, I set this change into motion, and all of my friends and colleagues began calling me by my new name. No longer having a feminine name freed me; I felt as if I'd pushed a huge boulder out of my path. By October, I began asking

some people to use male pronouns. Although I made these personal decisions myself, I don't know that I could have found the courage without relying on the support of friends and the network of trans-people in the area, many of whom, as strangers, shared their stories with me.

I had begun to more actively seek out the trans-community in Bill Bamberger's photo-documentary class in the spring of 2009, where I took portraits of people in order to document their lives and reveal the wide spectrum of gender. Most of these individuals, including trans-males, trans-females, and genderqueers, had never met me. I would spend an hour or two at each person's house. One person invited me to stay for dinner. Others talked openly with me about their experiences. I felt that they trusted me, although the strange intimacy—coupled with fact that they did not know me—created a palpable awkwardness. Furthermore, I, with camera in hand, was staring at them through the lens, which perhaps put me in a position of power. But my consultants were also involved in how they were depicting themselves, and most of the time, the relationship between us felt equal, a relationship based on the concept of offering and exchanging. For example, after conversing with me about their transgender experiences, almost all of my consultants then turned the tables: "So what about you?" I felt put on the spot, but also incredibly comfortable in talking about my gender identity with these strangers, whom I recognized as a part of my community. Although only three of the people that I initially photographed became my consultants for this project, I owe a great deal of gratitude to all of them. Their open-mindedness, courage, and kindness inspired me.

Still, I hesitated in taking on this project for my thesis. It felt too personal, too close. "How could this be considered fieldwork?," I thought. There was no specific destination, no center. But I also began to recognize that I'd made some specific choices about choosing my

project. After all, I hadn't gone away over the summer to conduct fieldwork for the other topics I was considering; instead I'd photographed and interviewed more trans-identified people in the area. I'd had opportunities to pursue other projects, but I kept returning to this work, until finally, I committed: this was the community that had found me, the community I had sought.

The Framing of Narratives

Initially, I planned to focus on trans-identified males carving out a space for themselves in the South; however, as my work progressed, the subject became less about *place* and more about the *space* of possibilities for transgender male masculinities and identities. After conducting a few interviews, I realized that several of my consultants do not identify as southern, and that only a couple spent much time discussing the significance of the region. I interpret the lack of conversation on the South to mean that my consultants found other experiences more pressing. Also, as someone who had my own preconceptions about the South, I believe now that my questions about the region were perhaps too closed, too general, or too tinged with my own biases to invite a dialogue. Tate once told me, "You see, you can tell you're a northerner just by the way you asked that" (2009b). Although the South is not central to this work, I also do not ignore it. Region plays out in the lives of my consultants and influences the shape of the community, and thus knits its way through some of the narratives. Furthermore, although the Triangle's politics and culture cannot be said to represent the South as a whole, the area does distinguish itself from urban or northern regions. Tate considers the area to be steeped in "southern ways," that allow for a more welcoming community for trans-people: "The moment a new queer crosses the corner—and you know this, Carter—we offer them sweet tea and collard greens and everyone wants to talk to you" (2009b). To sort out these complexities, truths, and stereotypes about the South

perhaps requires another project; for now, I must agree with Tate that I found this area—whether indicative of the South or small towns—to be welcoming, inviting, and accessible.

As someone who identifies as transgender and genderqueer, I conducted this ethnography as an insider, which gave me access and opportunities that others may not have. But as with any ethnographer-consultant relationship, my presence also framed and influenced the conversations. In her ethnography on the singer and story teller Bessie Eldreth, folklorist Patricia Sawin—in explaining her dialogical approach—stresses that one can "come to understand Eldreth . . . not by treating her stories simply as transparent carriers of meaning but rather by analyzing how she creates an identity through communicative interaction and how I, as her immediate partner in conversation, am implicated in any account that comes out of our interactions" (2004: 2). I write this ethnography with the understanding that these conversations between me and my consultants are themselves creations that are performed and constructed, as E. Patrick Johnson describes: "In this way, the narrator's 'experience' of his life is acknowledged and validated, but also corroborated by the presence of the ethnographer. Both are aware, however, that they are performing for the other—that this social interaction, however 'real'—is nonetheless a 'fragile fiction'" (2008: 10).

Except for times that I was either participating in events (such as attending a queer dance), or spending casual time with my consultants (such as going fishing with Tate), in which we engaged in spontaneous, unrecorded conversations, I solicited and recorded the conversations that appear in this work. Although I encouraged the consultants to guide the conversations, I also directed the interviews in both direct and indirect ways. For instance, though I did not ask each consultant the same question, I typically asked consultants to discuss how they identify, the relationship of their bodies to their gender identities, and how

they began to understand their transgender identity. The questions that I did *not* ask also directed the conversation; for example, I did not ask, *When did you realize you were in the wrong body,* or, *When did you know that you were really a man?*, questions that commonly appear in literature about transgender experiences. Also, I told my consultants that I was writing my thesis on the diversity of transgender male experiences, and that I wanted to include the different stories that did not "fit" into a master narrative. Thus, consultants, whether conscious of this or not, often crafted answers that connected to the overarching themes. Yet this crafting or performing does not undermine or negate the truths of their narratives.

Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. I tried to make the interviews as informal as possible. I went to my consultants' homes, or they came to mine, or we met at a bar or café. Some of the interviews turned into long, rich conversations, in which we shared information about our experiences. My role as the "interviewer" did not mean that I only listened; instead, I collaborated in the conversation. E. Patrick Johnson's description of his relationship to his consultants' conveys the collaborative nature of ethnography: "I did more than attentively listen to their narrative performances—my presence actually validated and affirmed their stories"; he adds that their "stories validated my own life story as a southern-born and -raised black gay man" (2008: 9). Similarly, I believe that by listening carefully, I gave my consultants a sense of acceptance and understanding. But also, as an insider who is still figuring out my trans-identity, my presence created a unique kind of collaborative structure in which my consultants realized that, on some level, they were "teaching" me, validating—and sometimes challenging—my experiences. Looking back on those conversations, I am certain that my consultants understood that I was not only there to document their stories, but also that I was seeking answers, acceptance, and community.

Ethnography does not conflate narrative with life, but stresses the constructive nature of the personal narrative, a powerful tool for figuring out, constructing, and claiming the self. Narratives represent a part of my consultants' experiences; they do not claim to be mirrors of lived experiences, nor do they naturalize identity. They do, however, offer a way, as Elaine Lawless asserts, for people to "sort out their life experiences in a way that makes sense" (2001: 6). The narratives that I heard generally did not follow a linear sequence or strict chronological framework; only one of my consultants, in speaking about his transgender identity, started with childhood. The majority of these narratives unfolded in a non-linear fashion, with consultants often returning to questions I'd asked earlier in the interview, in order to expand their thoughts. I do not present the stories in their entireties, but instead include parts throughout the text, revealing a multiplicity of truths and stories. I also recognize that both I and my consultants leave much out; what people don't say often is as reverberating as what they do say. These narratives present contradictions and silences and assertions, all buzzing with truths, not Truth, as Elaine Lawless explains in describing the narratives of the women with whom she worked:

> I am actually contesting the notion that 'truth' exists or that one account might be more 'truthful' than another. I honor the stories I receive as gifts of their imagination at that moment in time. I believe the narratives reveal a 'truth' about how the women view themselves and their world as reflected in these narratives. How they 'see' themselves on that given day clearly directs their narrative. As far as we are concerned, there is no other truth than that one. (2001: 6)

I do not claim to be asserting any grand truths or definite answers. Rather, I hope that this work expresses the narratives of possibilities that my consultants described, sharing some knowledge of my consultants' daily experiences, and the creation and affirmation of their identities. This is thus not a guide to "knowing" my consultants; instead, it is an invitation for readers and participants to more fully understand the expressions and meanings of transgender identities and masculinities. These conversations, for me, present an open,

ongoing dialogue, indicative of the possibilities of transgender male identities. "Even the word 'transitioning' is a difficult word, implies a beginning and an end," Mo told me. "I don't know if it ever ends" (2009b).

October 14, 2008

Stephen and I meet up for dinner at the Spotted Dog, exchanging getting-to-know-you stories. After, we stand outside while he smokes a cigarette. We're talking about relationships, exes, dating. He says, flirting, You should get yourself a boy. *I ask him if he would date a "bio guy." He looks at me, takes a drag on his cigarette.* Shit, I don't care if they have a penis or not. *I remember a few years ago, in New York, a girl I was dating introduced to me to a couple who had been best friends before they turned lovers. As best friends, they were a gay guy and a queer female. Then the female transitioned, they started dating, fell in love. Now they were two queer males. I couldn't stop staring at them. I filed the story away. Now Stephen reminds me. Since this conversation with Stephen, I've met many trans-males who date both trans and non-trans males, and still, whenever I hear a trans-identified male say this, or say he identifies as a gay man, the words resonate as one of those perfect notes on the continuum of possibilities: you create gender, construct identity, (re)make yourself in the image of how you feel.*

Chapter Two
Identities: A Starting Place

For the majority of interviews that I conducted for this project, I began by asking people how they identified. This often served as a starting point for them to narrate their process of understanding their gender identities. Alternately, I would specifically ask them to tell me about how they began to identify as transgender or genderqueer. Initially I thought of these stories as coming out narratives, but as I moved more deeply into the project, I began to understand them as something else, something that could not be contained by this genre. Although a significant element of the stories involves coming out to family, friends, and strangers, this coming out often unfolds slowly, in various contexts, or in a non-linear structure. For some, coming out means *disclosing* their trans-identities, while for others, it means *asserting* their trans-identities. Trans-identified people may come out continuously, in different shapes and forms, throughout their lives or on a daily basis, with names, pronoun preferences, bodies, clothing, and presentation threading pieces of the narrative together. Consultants narrated how their self-understanding and self-recognition hinged on these experiences, using descriptions such as "natural," "comfortable," and "right," so that *coming out* serves as a part of the more significant *coming into* one's gender identity.

While some transgender individuals might follow a very linear path that realizes the patterns of the coming out narrative associated with gay and lesbian identities, all too often this master narrative flattens the complexity of their experiences. For many of my consultants, coming into their gender identities involved discovering the "language"; identifying as queer; meeting other trans-identified people; recognizing themselves in

transgender representations; and changing their names and/or pronouns, clothing, presentation, and/or bodies. In this chapter, my consultants speak about how they identify, narrate their different "coming into" stories, and offer insights about the fluidity of gender and the possibilities of masculinity.

While I may highlight patterns in my consultants' narratives, my intention is not to categorize them, but rather to reveal how these narratives—like the consultants' identities—are neither fixed nor contained. My consultants often emphasized that they were sharing *their* particular experience with me, and wanted in no way to be representative of all transgender males. Throughout this project, those who are medically transitioning and those who are not narrate their stories and reveal daily experiences; my intention is not to conflate these experiences, or to de-emphasize the differences. Consultants acknowledged both the differences and similarities, though they fell on different ends of the spectrum on which they felt was more representative. Tate, for instance, felt that it was important to recognize the differences:

> Because they're not in the same—
> I think that's something to be aware of.
> Genderqueer and
> trans-identified who is not medically transitioned and
> those who have transitioned and
> those who are stealth
> are *all* radically different.
> As *common* as it seems they ought to be.
> With just, in isolation, and amongst the groups too, in some ways,
> [they] overlap in others, but not always. (2010d)

However, Stephen disagreed: "I just don't think they're that different" (2008). Because my consultants claim their transgender identities, or do not live 100% as stealth, I believe that although many of the day-to-day experiences are different, the claiming, constructing, and asserting of trans-male identities for those who choose to medically transition and those who do not are not deeply divided spaces. Instead, overlapping experiences and commonalities

reveal a shared understanding and language that underscores this emergent space of possibility. These commonalities extend into issues of identifying, or "naming" oneself, of which the many possibilities suggest a fluidity that complicates the notion of categories.

And so I feel like how I walk through the world, I'm fluid.
-Neeve (2010)

For transgender people, language often seems too narrow or divisive to accurately "name" one's gender identity, and defining one's gender fluidity complicates the problem even more. However, my consultants find unique—and similar—words to describe and express their personal gender identities in ways that evoke the richness of their experiences.

The first time I interviewed Tate we sat on the back patio at Fuse and drank bottles of PBR. Tate also ordered crab rolls. He was tan, and his teeth shone when he laughed. On his forearm a tattoo of a bird spreading its wings flexed as he reached for his beer. He'd been back in town for a week, after hiking the Appalachian trail. We'd talked a few times at shows and seen each other in town, but we didn't know each other well. During the interview, Tate was expressive, funny, and easy going. When I asked him how he identified, he told me that he identified as "trans with a little 'T,'" which made me laugh, but also seemed like a creative, accurate way of describing my own identity.

Ten months later, I interviewed him again. At this point, our friendship had grown and deepened. We often met for a beer, talking football, relationships, gender, sex. Tate was one of the first people to use my name regularly, coupled with the male pronoun. When I reminded him of his original answer, he expanded his description:

> Yeah, trans with a little 'T,' is typically how, is my noun.
> And butch is my adjective.
> And genderqueer.
> It's almost like butch transgender queer, is how it would go.
> You know, genderqueer is the big umbrella term that
> trans with a little 'T' fits into for me.
> Like I am part of the genderqueer sphere.

So I am also—you know those little circles?
So the little circle is trans and big circle is genderqueer,
so I identify as both.
But just off the cuff, it would be trans. (2010d)

For people outside of the community, the language of identification may seem complicated and esoteric. *Trans, genderqueer, gender nonconforming*. Language often shifts within the queer and trans communities, and trans-identified people, even among themselves, may define these terms differently, or shift back and forth between them. Finding language that is expansive enough to describe trans-experiences is often difficult. Yet even by using "old" words that are part of the patriarchal, binary system, we find new ways of expressing our identities, challenging traditional concepts of masculinity.

All of my consultants identify, on some level, as transgender, a kind of umbrella term that also includes gender non-conforming or genderqueer. None of my consultants described themselves as "transsexual," a word that seems outdated and perhaps also too narrow, historically referring only to those who fully medically transitioned and also implying a sexual identity. Some of my consultants identify as genderqueer, which means that a person challenges the gender binary by presenting a fluid gender identity. Often, trans-males who do not medically transition, who do not "pass" consistently as male, claim genderqueer as an identity, though not always. Those who identify as transgender may also identify as genderqueer, and genderqueers might also identify as trans.

When I asked Tate, "How do you identify in terms of gender," he didn't mince words: "It's a question that's totally loaded, it's big and broad, but it's a good of a place to start as any, and I think that's important, to recognize it's a starting place. Just in the evolution of gender and sexuality, it's a starting place" (2009a). I recognize it is a problematic question in some ways; I was asking my consultants to categorize themselves, and to de-emphasize significant parts of their identities. But, as Tate said, the question served as "a

starting place," a launching point, a way into the narratives. It's also a question that trans-identified people are used to thinking about and answering. At transgender panels at queer conferences, panel members typically begin by saying their names, pronoun preference, and how they identify. Same thing at the support group in Carrboro. *Hi, I'm Carter, I prefer male pronouns, I identify as trans/genderqueer.* In these spaces made up of fellow trans-identified peers, people do not assume anything about a person's gender identity or sexuality, and they speak the same language. For some people, these meetings may be the only place in their lives where they feel comfortable enough to state their pronoun preference or their name, the only spaces in which they feel fully recognized.

Trans-identified people tend to ruminate over this question often. It's a question wrapped up in expression, performance, and understanding. With our carefully constructed words, we assert our identities. But often the words don't reveal the richness of our exploration, the spectrum of possibilities. Several of my consultants answered this question in a word or two, whereas others provided more convoluted answers, trying to get to that richness. Neeve, for example, identifies with male language, but also claims his "female" identity as about "30%" of his gender:

> And I would say that is best defined within sort of the GLBT or queer text,
> or genderqueer.
> I mean I identify as trans, I identify as transgender,
> because I take that meaning to be quite literal,
> like trans being a bridging effect.
> And so I feel like how I walk through the world, I'm fluid,
> in terms of how people are reading me
> and it can vary from minute to minute,
> day to day,
> and so my existence is
> *bridging* those two identities, those two experiences,
> in some way, shape, or form. (2010)

Many stressed to me that this was how they were identifying *now*, implying that their gender identity or the language they used could very well shift. For example, when I spoke with Mo,

he told me that he was glad to be participating in the interview because he'd been reconsidering his identity lately, and wanted to an opportunity to talk about it. Most of my consultants identified in several ways, with nearly all of them embracing the word "queer" as a key part, emphasizing that their gender identity and/or sexuality challenges heteronormative expectations, and also enmeshing their gender identity with a political identity. The four consultants who are not medically transitioning feel comfortable with "genderqueer"; Mo, who *is* medically transitioning, also felt that this described a part of his understanding of himself. He explained that he feels comfortable with identifying as a "trans-guy" but not as a "man": "I think my views of my masculine identity and what it means to me to be a trans guy who refuses to think of himself as a trans 'man' are always changing and evolving" (2009b). Similarly, Tate feels comfortable calling himself a "boy," but recognizes this as being different than "man" (2009a).

I met up with Luke on a quiet, sunny Sunday afternoon. We sat at the kitchen table at his house in Durham. Luke wore jeans and black t-shirt with the words "No Nos Quedaremos Callados" printed across the front in all-caps with "We Will Not Be Silent" underneath in smaller letters, over top of a gray and black long-sleeved shirt. A chain of silver beads draped around his neck, and his gray rectangular glasses matched the stripes in his shirt. Luke was barefoot. I was in jeans and a T-shirt, my binder tight against my chest. I started the interview with the identity question, with the caveat that I knew I was asking a "big" question. Luke hesitated for a moment; then as he began to talk, Luke's answer grew more and more layered:

> Um—it changes frequently,
> so the simplest way that I use to normally, I use to describe it is genderqueer,
> because I find that that's kind of, that can describe a lot of different things
> or it can encompass a lot of different things.
> So, yeah, I've consistently identified as genderqueer.
> But if we were going to get into some more kind of, I don't know, descriptive

terms, or I don't know, what I might feel on different days,
I identify as female because I am in a female body, which is different for me than identifying as a woman, which I see as more of a gender identity which I *don't* have,
but as far as the sex of the biological body, I'm female.

And that's affected . . . how I'm raised and how I see the world.

And sometimes I identify more with the word with "trans,"
sometimes less,
kind of depending on how I'm feeling and how that word's used.
And sometimes I identify as a dyke, which is really a sexual orientation,
but implies you're female. So
that's just complicated.

[He laughs] (2010)

Of all of my consultants, Luke identifies the most strongly with a fluid genderqueer identity that encompasses both male and female aspects. Luke prefers both female and male pronouns, or feels comfortable with the gender neutral third person. Throughout this project, I will switch between these pronouns when describing Luke.

These different examples depict the wide spectrum of trans-identities, and demonstrate how trans-identified males assume control of language in order to "name" their gender identities. Naming, which plays an important role in claiming one's gender identity, complicates the traditional categories of gender. Similarly, my consultants' personal narratives about "understanding" their identity also complicates these categories while simultaneously undoing the construction of a singular trans-narrative.

I had some lovely bows.
-Stephen (2008)

The identity question typically propelled my consultants into narrating the multi-layers of their transgender experiences, in which they confirmed, reshaped, and challenged master coming out narratives to express the possibilities of *coming into* narratives. One common characteristic of the coming out narrative suggests that typically, people *knew* they

were gay or lesbian when they were children, but were not allowed to, or didn't understand how to, realize this part of themselves. This experience rings true for many gay and lesbian people, though it's certainly not universally valid. Similarly, master transgender narratives tend to operate on two basic premises: the person "knew he was a boy" when he was a kid; and he "felt trapped in the wrong body" for all of his life until he was able to change or "fix" his body.[3] Some transgender males *do* have this experience. Several of my consultants, for instance, felt like they were boys, or wanted to be boys, when they were children; they also, however, offered nuances and details that enriched and expanded this master narrative. Other consultants, in turn, expressed experiences that challenged this narrative *as the only experience.*

Typically, when my consultants began to tell me about "figuring out" their trans-identities, they did not begin with childhood. A few of them didn't even mention childhood at all. Overall, people tended to focus more on their adult lives, when they began to grasp the "language" of their trans-identities and experiences. Stories about childhood do, however, also figure into the construction of masculinities and the creation of possibilities for trans-males, and thus contribute to the realization of this project.

While some of my consultants felt like a boy or were more aware of their male identity as a child, others have no such memories; these differences in no way fall neatly along a divide of who is medically transitioning and who is not, although they do sometimes connect to how a person identifies now. For instance, both Chase—who is on testosterone—and Tate—who has chosen not to go on testosterone—identified as boys

[3] Often this narrative is expected in order for a person to receive surgery, as Judith Butler examines in "Doing Justice to Someone" (2004) and Dean Spade documents in "Mutilating Gender," in which he critiques the regimes of normalization (2006). Jason Cromwell also reveals the history of this narrative in medical discourse (1999).

when they were children and were read as "tomboys"; both now consider themselves to be masculine in a "butch" way.

When I interviewed Chase, we sat in his friend's tree house in Chapel Hill on a bright Sunday afternoon in September. I first met Chase at the Equality North Carolina conference in Durham the previous fall. We'd eaten lunch together, and he'd regaled me with stories—from his experiences of working at a women's prison to riding horses with his father in Eureka, North Carolina. Chase, 45, has dark, intense eyes, an angular face, silvery dark buzzed hair, and a mustache. Whenever I see him, he shakes my hand hard or slaps me on the back. On this day, he was drinking a Mountain Dew, and paused occasionally to light a cigarette. He wore a black T-shirt with a picture of a two-headed phoenix on the front, its wings spread. His voice is low and resonant, sweetened with a Carolina lilt. Birds sang in the trees around us.

> I always, when I was little, I used to tell my mom and dad
> I wanted to be a boy when I grew up.
> "I want to be a boy," all the time,
> "Why can't I be a boy?"
> And I guess I suppressed that. And then, at some point, I'm 45 now,
> so, I had a problem all my life with not being a boy, but I suppressed it.
> And then I didn't know that much about trans, transgender, you know, transitioning
> and all that stuff, and I just pretended like I could live
> the way I was living,
> which
> was pretty miserable.

Chase explained to me how close he felt to his father when he was growing up, that his father accepted his boy-like identity, whereas his mother fought it.

> My dad told me before he died, he said, 'You know what? I want you to know,
> I couldn't ask for a better boy.'
>
> [He pauses]
>
> Sweetest thing he ever said to me. Or one of the sweetest things.
> But I don't know, I don't know how, he probably just would have told me
> just to be exactly how I was. I don't know. He was born in '25.

He was very, very,
what do you say,
old soul?
Very very compassionate, and understanding. But
I don't know how he would have felt about me
actually trying to change my physical appearance.
        He might would have been okay with it.
I think if I would have discussed with him the trauma that I suffered all my life,
  he might would have understood.
But he considered me his boy. (2009)

Chase's memories of himself feeling like a boy and his father's recognition of this created a way for him to claim and understand his gender identity many years later. Similarly, Tate's childhood memories also revolve around feeling like a boy, which he related to his father's masculinity:

I've always identified as my father's son.
I grew up in very much a working class county where it was my father,
    actually my stepfather,
and my mother, who was very much absent a lot of the time—
    she had a lot of issues.
And my little brother, who actually the joke in our family
    was that I should have been the boy and he should have been the girl
    because he was softer and more feminine than me any day of the week.
    He's six years younger than me.
But, anyhow, in a small country home,
it's like we didn't have heat, we had a wood stove for seven years, and we had some
  land, and it was just my dad and me, and so I—
he didn't have anybody else to help him build our house,
didn't have anyone else to help him cut down the wood, and
so I naturally fell into that position, and was treated very much like a son would be.
        And so I just grew up.
When I was 6, I said, "I'm not wearing a dress again,"
and my mom said, "Fine," and that was it,
like after that I just sort of ran wild in the woods and
went fishing and
played with forts and
my dad was military so we used all his combat gear, and
we'd run out there and,
you know, play war games, and
you know, nobody said anything,
        it was fine.
And then, so I pretty much always have felt very boyish, never felt like a girl,
and then, uh, God,
        hated puberty. (2009a)

Tate didn't offer me this story as a way to *explain* his gender identity, but more as a way to show me a fuller picture of himself and to emphasize how his understanding of his masculinity evolved. Other consultants also recalled *not* feeling like a girl, or remember identifying, *in some ways*, as boys; some, like Tate, recall puberty as a traumatic experience that cut the genders in two, without leaving any room for blurring the boundaries.

While Chase's and Tate's stories both entail growing up, in essence, as boys, this isn't nearly always the trans trajectory. Ryan, for instance, offers an alternative story. I met Ryan at the Open Eye, a coffee shop in Carrboro, on a cold rainy night. Ryan—tall, thin, with shaggy brown hair—has been identifying as genderqueer/trans for about nine years. He felt like he related to aspects of the dominant narrative, but that his experience challenged the traditional structure, expressing nuances and subtleties that cannot be contained by a singular account. Before the interview, I'd talked to Ryan about my hope to present a variety of stories that didn't necessarily conform to traditional transgender narratives; during the interview, he addressed this several times in relation to his own experience.

> I think I get so mad about that stuff, the whole trapped in the wrong body.
> Because I think that, yeah, I think there's definitely people that have that experience, so not to . . . deny that experience.
> But, yeah, it does seem like that is the only narrative in popular media.
> I mean I think when I was younger
> I definitely had fantasies of being a boy.
> I spent a lot of time playing by myself and whenever I would pretend,
> I would be a guy, a boy, for the most part.
> But, I don't think it was—it still didn't make me think like,
> "Yeah, I should have been a boy this whole time."
> I remember having those moments, those thoughts like I wish I was a boy, but it didn't feel, you know, from this certain point on [that] I *had* to be a boy, or this wasn't the right body. (2009)

To present Ryan's different experience does not diminish or discredit those who are more aligned with the dominant narrative; rather, the multitude of different experiences creates a more inviting, inclusive, and open space that encourages others to claim their identities.

Similar to Ryan, Stephen's story also challenges the dominant narrative. I'd only ever heard people talk about their trans-experiences in ways that upheld the dominant narrative until I attended a panel at UNC in the fall of 2008, when I heard Stephen speak about his childhood. About a month later, I interviewed him for a paper on which I was working. We sat in his living room, on separate couches, on a sunny afternoon. Stephen's salt and pepper hair, and a very faint shadow of sideburn stubble, glinted in the sunlight. I asked him to talk more about his childhood experiences.

CS: I remembered you saying you weren't this stereotypical boyish—

No. [He smiles.] I mean, I was prissy. I had some lovely bows.

CS: Did you feel like that, when you said you didn't have the language. Um.
There is the narrative that "I felt trapped in the wrong body,"
but you didn't feel like that, like,
so did that make [it] hard to figure it out?

I mean I think it's just a different experience and I don't think I felt trapped
and I don't have early memories of, "I am a boy." I don't have that.
And I don't, I don't really know,
which I think for a while was really—
because I didn't have those early memories of "I am a boy when I was three,"
which a lot of people have, and I think it is the narrative that's presented
especially in popular media now and all this shit
with trans kids [who] are like six and know they're trans.
It made me question if my experience was valid
and if that meant I was really trans.
Because when I was little I don't remember having these—
I don't ever remember strongly identifying as a girl.
Like when I think about being little
I don't think of myself as being a girl . . .
There were things that I liked and I knew what I liked
and if I look back on that now I would say a lot of those things
were traditional boys things, but I didn't think of myself as a boy.
And I also liked girl things.
And I wasn't dressing as a boy.
I hated wearing dresses, but I didn't—
So I think that there's not—
I think that people's stories who are similar to mine are not sort of as sexy as,
"Oh I knew I was a boy when I was three." (2008)

Stephen's memories of childhood—like those of Ryan—expand the traditional trans-narrative. Stories like his aren't often told not only because they are not as "sexy," but also because they complicate and challenge deeply held ideas about masculinity and gender. By embracing more traditionally feminine aspects of his childhood and asserting that he didn't think of himself as a boy, Stephen dismantles gender as "natural." Rather, his narrative implies a certain level of choice and construction in regards to gender. By sharing his stories with me, Stephen was in fact shattering boundaries and inviting me to claim my own gender identity. What seemed out of reach, something that didn't feel like I was allowed to be a part of, suddenly opened its doors, and appeared a little bit closer.

As I talked to more people, I met others who felt similarly. These different stories, from Chase feeling like his father's son, to Mo telling me, "I did not have a childhood where I knew I wanted to be a boy," reveal diversities and details that do not typically get told (2009b). Not only do the diversity of these stories create a more expansive understanding of gender identities, but they also validate others' experiences and present trans-males with new possibilities.

Being a butch lesbian didn't really work for me.
-Stephen (2008)

My consultants understand sexuality as separate from gender (for many of us, this concept was earth-shattering and freeing). Yet all of my consultants referenced some aspect of coming out as queer in relation to their trans-narratives. For some, claiming their sexual identity figured heavily into understanding their gender identity. Some began to question their gender identity and their sexual identity at the same time. Many began to understand their sexuality before they had the "language" to express their gender identity. Some of my consultants lived much of their lives identifying as a lesbian, while for others, the experience

was more short-lived; for all of my consultants, however, coming out as queer connected in some way to coming into their trans-identities.

The majority of my consultants claimed their sexuality while they were in college. Ryan had been thinking about identifying as bisexual for a couple of years in high school, and then came out during his sophomore year in college, around 2001. He said he called himself a dyke, but only for a year or two before he felt more comfortable with "genderqueer" (2009). Tate said that college felt like "an awakening," where he met and connected with the queer community. "Basically, the early days were dyke-identified," he explained (2009a).

Chase spent many years presenting as a butch lesbian, but this never felt right. As a masculine-identified person, he felt "butch" but he also felt "different" from the other butch lesbians he was around.

> CS: So were you identified as a lesbian before—
>
> [sighs] Well, I was told I was.
> [He chuckles]
> But I never fit into the lesbian,
> I don't know,
> I just never.
>
> CS: How do you feel like you didn't fit in?
>
> I just felt *different.*
> I mean, it's terrible when, it's bad enough when you feel different
> from what 95% of the population, and then well, 93 or so,
> and then you get into the other 7%, and you still feel different.
> [He smiles]
> But I did, I did feel different.
> And I was told by most of my partners,
> "You're different from any other . . . partner." (2009)

Chase's experience of coming into his gender identity, of first finding that language, differed from my other consultants, all of whom were attending college in the late-nineties to early 2000s, when transgender and queer theory was growing more popular. Chase felt more alone

in his realization. But around 2005, he was living in Germany with his partner, and he'd been reading about transgender issues. One day he walked past a "sexual institute" and told his partner, "I said, 'I want to transition.'" I asked him if he struggled with this understanding, but he shook his head.

> No, it was just like an epiphany
> or something—I don't know,
> just BOOM.
> But you know, with a partner that's a lesbian,
> it, you know, in other words, I couldn't be too serious about it.
> It was something that I didn't know, it was, the dynamics were probably wrong,
> because I didn't know how to deal with it, with *her,* that's like an extra issue. (2009)

In this situation, Chase's partner's sexual identity complicated his own gender identity: how could he claim a male identity, if his partner identified as a lesbian?

Such complex questions may overwhelm, but they also open windows of possibility. Chase felt comfortable as masculine and butch, but not as a "lesbian," which described a female identity. So while he felt comfortable in claiming a part of his identity, he needed the language to realize how this also connected to his gender identity. The concept of "butch" and its relation to gender identity and sexuality is complex and different for each person. In the dominant trans-narrative, one grows up as a tomboy, identifies as a butch dyke, and then transitions into a man, yielding a neat hierarchal continuum of masculinity.[4] Several of my consultants' lives followed a similar trajectory, though they also enriched this narrative with their own personal challenges and realizations. This is not true, however, for everyone. Although many trans-males claim a butch masculinity, many others identify as "fags," or "sissies." Furthermore, some trans-males are attracted to women, some to men, and others

[4] Judith Halberstam examines the problem with this continuum, focusing particularly on lesbian masculinity (1998).

to trans-identified people. Or some combo, or all of the above. A transgender identity does not dictate or proscribe sexuality.[5]

Like Chase, Stephen also spent time identifying as a lesbian. He remembers when he was a freshman in high school, growing up in Johnson City, Tennessee, getting an issue of *Newsweek* in the mail that had a cover story on lesbians. He recalled thinking, "'Oh my God, incredible.' And I read the whole thing and reread it over and over, and thought well this makes sense, this is what going on, and I remember that sort of a defining moment" (2009). This story about lesbians, which nobody in Johnson City was talking about, seemed like the only way to express his feelings of difference. He came out to some of his friends and his boyfriend in high school, and in college, "I was the big gay on campus." People read him and his girlfriend as a butch-femme couple, but Stephen laughed as he told me this:

> Being a butch lesbian didn't really work for me.
> It just wasn't,
> that's not who I am, that's just not *me*.
> I mean I guess at the time I dressed like a butch lesbian,
> I mean, it's just sort of funny for me to even think about. (2008)

Though many issues about masculine expression may overlap, living as a butch lesbian versus a transgender male are different experiences, different identities. Butch, in relation to lesbians, tends to signify masculine mannerisms and appearance—a person who expresses what are thought of as "male" traits, but who identifies as a female who is attracted to other females. A butch lesbian and a transgender male might in many ways "appear" to be similar; however, a trans-male does not identify as female, and is not necessarily attracted to

[5] Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) laid the groundwork for defining gender as an invented category that is performed, de-naturalizing it and complicating its relationship to sexuality. Other LGBT scholars, such as Cromwell (1999) articulate the fluidity and multiple sexualities of trans-identified males. Today, trans-males identifying as gay men or "fags" is common in the trans-male community, and online, one can find groups such as "Gay FTMs and the Men Who Love Them" as well as websites such as "Queer TransMen.org."

females.[6] Furthermore, a trans-male might wear more "effeminate" clothes or express more feminine mannerisms, identifying as gay man or "a fag." As Stephen began to see himself with a clearer understanding, he felt distanced from this earlier lesbian identity, so that now he could even laugh about it: "that's just not *me*."

Several of my consultants, including Chase and Ryan, felt similarly to Stephen, and consider their trans-male/genderqueer identities to be entirely separate from a dyke/lesbian identity. But not all of my consultants feel a great distance from this identity. Luke, for example, sometimes identifies as a dyke as a *part* of Luke's experiences. For Luke, this identification as a dyke does not feel *wrong,* but it's certainly not expansive or complex enough to capture Luke's experiences; to identify as a dyke expresses only an aspect of Luke's identity, and is also something that shifts—Luke doesn't feel attached to this identity. Luke was in college when she began to question sexuality and gender around the same time:

> I mean, I guess on, for my internal process, they started happening at the same time,
> but it was a lot easier to, uh, adjust to the idea of "I like girls,"
> and I don't, I don't identify strictly as gay, but it was easier to accept
> that I could be sexual attracted to different people than it was to figure out this
> whole gender stuff.
> Because I feel for a long time I went back and forth between,
> "Oh I'm definitely a woman," or "I'm trans, this thing means I'm a woman,
> this thing means I want to be a guy," and I kept trying to fit myself into a *box*.
> And going back and forth about it, and having a really hard time. And—
> It just felt a lot more complicated.
> And a lot more—
> that's what . . . affects what people see about me. It's not like people look
> at me on the street and . . . stare at me or say things to me because
> they know who I'm dating,
> it's because of how I *look*. Which is affected largely by my gender.
> So eventually I just stopped trying to fit myself into all the boxes
> and it's been a lot better since then. (2010)

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[6] Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998) considers the complexities of masculinity, with an in-depth look at the "butch lesbian." She also looks at the relationship among lesbians who "pass" as men, butches, and FTMs, in regards to masculinity—a conversation that is often lacking in queer communities; however, Halberstam at times simplifies and underestimates the identities and sexualities of trans-males.

For many trans-identified individuals, the narrative of a sexual identity feels easier to understand or grasp than asserting a gender identity that differs from the one that was assigned at birth. Such narratives offer more presentations and models, and more accessibility, whereas finding a singular way to express gender may feel more difficult and elusive. For many of my consultants, they knew they felt "different" from heterosexual society, and the only language of difference that they had access to, or felt ready to learn, was that of *sexual* difference. The language of gender difference is daunting, and to then shatter the binary, on a daily basis, can at times feel exhausting and difficult. For Luke, letting go of the rules and boundaries of the binary freed him; when she stopped trying to "fit" into the boxes, she began to carve out his own space of being.

Whether or not they felt comfortable identifying as lesbians, being a part of the queer or dyke community helped many of my consultants learn more about themselves and/or gave them access to a new language. The majority of my consultants recall college as a time of sexuality and gender exploration, with a culmination of different experiences leading them closer to understanding and expressing their gender identities. Many were reading queer, gender, and sexuality theory, and "some of this made sense," said Mo (2009b). Several consultants mentioned Leslie Feinberg, the author of *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and *Transgender Warriors* (1997), as deeply impacting their understanding of gender identities. *Stone Butch Blues* was a groundbreaking text that in the 90s became popular in gender and sexuality studies classes; Feinberg became a well-known figure for the emerging transgender community. For several of my consultants, Feinberg offered them words, recognition, articulation. Tate felt like after he read Feinberg, he had a way to understand his butch identity on a deeper level:

> Basically, the early days were dyke–identified.
> Then the butch identity came after that,

> and then slowly grew with my first girlfriend. You know,
> [I] read *Stone Butch Blues* and that was like coming home.
> You know. And I've basically since then identified as sort of a
> classic old-school butch identity and that hasn't changed. (2009a)

Like coming home. The experience of reading Feinberg did not deliver a wholly new language, but rather confirmed what Tate already knew but had not been able to fully express. The words acted as a kind of mirror. Neeve recalls seeing himself in a similar kind of mirror:

> And so I remember Leslie Feinberg's *Transgender Warriors* came out
> and I was reading it, and there was somebody in there,
> I think Chris or something, and just very butch, very masculine looking,
> totally just looked like a dude, and basically said,
> "My understanding of myself is I'm . . . this born-in-a-female-body
> and I'm most comfortable expressing myself as male,
> and because the world is perceiving me a decent amount of the time as male,
> I can't *not* call myself transgender."
> And that resonated with me.
>
> CS: Like '94?
>
> Yeah, '94. That was the moment where I had the language.
> And I said, "Yeah, that's what I am." (2010)

The moment where I had the language. A language helps one to see oneself. When Neeve read this person's self-description, he felt like he also recognized himself: *Yeah, that's what I am.* Tate describes the recognition as *coming home.* For Stephen, before he understood the language, he recalled when he was in the 8th grade, he "started to put language with what was going on . . . the language of difference. Something was going on that I perceived as something that wasn't normally going on. I got really confused about what that was" (2008). This language eluded him for years, but in college, he began to grasp it. His girlfriend was taking Women's Studies classes, and would pass along books on gender and sexuality for him to read. He met Leslie Feinberg his junior year: "I think that sort of changed things for me" (2008).

This "language of difference" encompasses more than words. The language is also about shared understanding, recognition, and performance. For the majority of my consultants, the *language*, as well as their *coming into* their gender identities, grew out of a rich array of experiences. For a few of my consultants, performing gender on stage gave them access into expressing and claiming their gender identities. Tate, Neeve, and Ryan were all members of the Cuntry Kings in Durham, a drag-king troupe that started in 2000; this experience encouraged them to experiment with masculinity in ways that helped reveal to them their own gender identities.

Here is Ryan:

> I had a male drag identity, and so that started the process of . . .
> performing gender,
> and it was opening up this idea of gender being a performance,
> and it being fluid, and all that stuff.
> And then within the troupe, there's certain people within the troupe that started calling me "he," and I just never corrected people when they started calling me "he."
> And, yeah, at first it was just like, you know, "whatever,"
> it's weird,
> but then over time
> it felt right. (2009)

Performing gender on stage enabled Ryan to move along a path in which he was learning and embracing a language of fluidity, and when this path then led him down a path of male identification, when others began referring to him as "he," he went with it. *It felt right.* Like Ryan, Neeve also began to come into his identity when he began performing drag. Neeve started performing before he moved to North Carolina, when he was still living in New York:

> A part of the evolution of my gender identity was starting to perform drag
> and I started performing drag in, like, 1998 in New York,
> and within that world I was sort of automatically just called "he,"
> and so that was lovely.
> And I felt like I was walking into a space that was recognizing . . .
> this part of myself. (2010)

The shift to male pronouns for many trans-identified males creates an illuminating and significant effect, and words offer a window into self-recognition. Both Ryan and Neeve express how others began to use the male pronouns with them first, identifying them in a sense before they had even verbally identified themselves. But they also show that the experiences of responding to and *accepting* the pronoun profoundly affected their own comfort with and understanding of themselves. Neeve's elegant metaphor of "walking into a space that was recognizing . . . this part of myself" expresses the emergent understanding that trans-males often experience in claiming their gender identities.

Thus, the drag-king performances offered a community of people who recognized my consultants, and created a space in which they could also recognizes themselves. This feeling of community, recognition, and shared language also extended into the audience, as Mo explained to me. Like Luke, Mo was in college when he began to realize both his sexuality and his gender identity; as he says, in some ways, it felt like "a big brick hit me—I'm not really straight" (2009b). But he also felt anxious about figuring out his identity, and took time to come into a place where he feels comfortable. He was reading gender and sexuality theory, and eventually—as he thought more seriously about medically transitioning—turned to online chat groups for support; he also started his own blog, narrating his story. He shaved his head and dressed more masculine, trying on this new identity that felt closer to who he really was. Going to the Cuntry King shows also figured into his initial understanding. He recalled how excited he felt to be around other trans-identified males and genderqueers, and remembers thinking, "I can't believe people *do* this." Mo attended each show, dressed in a polo shirt and looking boyish. "I saw a lot of ways of exploring gender and a lot of people doing it," he explained, and added, this "was around the perfect time for me" (2009b).

Tate also felt that performing drag allowed him to see himself in a new way, a way that made sense. After he started performing drag, he attended a Sexuality Studies Abroad Program in Amsterdam, and on about the third day, he asked people to start calling him Tate, his drag name, instead of his birth name: "I just discovered I could remake myself and be whoever I wanted to be." He spoke with excitement as he remembered the experience:

> And it was really awesome.
> And they didn't know who I was anyways,
> and they just accepted it, and pretty soon after that they were like,
> "Should we use the male pronouns?," and I was like,
> "Sure, why not, that sounds fun."
> And then I came back and I told everybody that I was going by Tate,
> but wasn't very strict about it, you know . . .
> but then most people would start calling me Tate, and then they all did.
> And they just started naturally using the male pronoun with me,
> it wasn't like a mental anguish struggle, it was like a natural,
> "Oh this is like this feels right" sort of thing. (2009a)

This feels right. Natural. My consultants' descriptions of coming into their trans-identities made me think of slipping into my most comfortable clothes, or walking through the door of the place that feels like home. Outsider recognition, community support, and language helped my consultants *come into* their identities, like lights illuminating their own particular paths. My consultants narrated various crucial experiences that helped them to *recognize* themselves, but also expressed that this coming into their identities did not hinge on a singular moment. Mo told me, "I guess I began settling into a trans-male identity early in 2005 . . . but there was never a clear light bulb moment for me when everything fell into place" (2009b). Stephen spoke along similar lines when I asked him how he reached the decision to change his name: "I don't know, everything just sort of came together, and it made sense. I don't know that there was a moment that I was like I got to change my name today" (2008).

As several of these particular stories demonstrate, changing their name or pronouns played a significant part in many of my consultants' coming into their trans-identities For

some people, the switch seemed momentous, for others, the shift was gradual yet hugely liberating. Ryan, for instance, never changed his name—Ryan is his birth name—and so never sent out an email about pronouns either.

> Um, I think, the big shift to be calling "he" in more places,
> and identifying as trans . . . it all kind of happened naturally,
> it wasn't ever . . . this big coming out moment,
> or, because I didn't have a name change,
> I wasn't like, "I'm going to be called he,"
> and I didn't . . . I've never really told anybody about a pronoun change, actually. (2009)

In contrast, Luke had a more ceremonious change:

> And so when I thought about Luke, it was a pretty quick transition
> and I really comfortable in that name,
> and so I started asking a few people that summer to call me that.
> And then in August, I, um, I actually had a name change ceremony
> on this retreat I was at, and when I came back from that retreat
> I sent out an email to my friends and everything. (2010)

For many, changing one's name or pronoun asserts this language of difference and symbolizes transition, and may also open other doors. When Mo started going by Mo, which had been a nickname in high school, this allowed him to see the possibilities: "It was an awakening, that you could say a different name, that you could tell people, 'Don't call me by my birth name,' like you could go to English class and say, 'I want to be called whatever'" (2009b).

Even with all of these experiences—finding the language, receiving recognition, constructing one's narrative—coming into one's transgender identity takes time. Stephen's story, for example, illustrates this process of gradual emergence. Stephen began thinking more deeply about gender and sexuality issues in college, but he still did not feel ready to claim a trans-identity: "I was nowhere close to be ready to be able to talk about it or even to think about it." After he graduated from an all-women's college, he moved to North Carolina, where he went back to school for his Master's degree, and also taught high school.

During this time, he thought more seriously about transitioning, which included "reading stuff online and reading people's blogs." He would read these stories, look at pictures, and talk to his girlfriend about it "but still, it didn't really seem like a possibility—I mean, I thought about it all the damn time." He was teaching high school, and felt that the idea of transitioning was impossible; he also didn't believe he would ever medically transition while his grandmother was still alive. But when he moved to Chapel Hill to return to school for a Master's in Social Work, "I think it seemed a lot more possible in this space" (2008).

Stephen spent a couple of months in Kenya for a volunteer project, and thought more deeply about his identity. "It was pretty clear to met that I couldn't, it wasn't—it just wasn't working for me," he recalls. He started to make changes with language. The person he was dating began consistently using male pronouns: "and it's a little funny at first . . . you have to kind of get used to it yourself. But it was *awesome*." For spring break, Stephen went to Honduras with his Social Work department to help build homes:

> When I was in Honduras it was important for me to be there as *Stephen*
> and for people to see me as male
> and it was incredible
> because everybody there called me Stephen
> and whether or not they saw me as male, they respected it.
> And I was working with these people, and building a house,
> and they sure as hell didn't have to respect it. (2008)

A few weeks after his return, Stephen filled his prescription for testosterone.

In some ways, Stephen's story follows a familiar kind of progression. But as he narrated the story, he did not move directly from point A to point B; as I asked questions, he would remember other parts, or find a different way to say something that he'd already mentioned. Stephen's telling of his narrative—similar to other stories I heard from my consultants—unfolded in a non-sequential manner, suggesting that he does not view this

process as a single story per se, but rather a gradual unfolding marked by many stories, some less and some more significant, whose relationship may only emerge in retrospect.

Although many of my consultants spoke about pronoun or name changes as significant to their self-recognition, these were only one of many experiences that revealed their trans-identities. For some of my consultants, changes in appearance held the same kind of power as pronouns and names. For those who performed drag, constructing a masculine appearance clearly linked to their identity and connected to the pronoun shift. But appearance and presentation also figures into the stories of those consultants who did not perform drag. For example, a change in presentation figured heavily into Luke's narrative:

> Then it was funny because I shaved my head
> and then it just, it enabled me to kind of re-envision what I looked like overall.
> And then when I was starting to wear some clothes that were more masculine,
> I started to notice that girls started flirting with me [laughs] and I was like,
> "Oh, I don't have to be pretty to be attractive to some people."
> So that was a really nice surprise.
> And then I just kind of—
> once I started to accept that,
> and really think about all the times in my life when I'd been oppressing that,
> and allowing myself to open up to that
> it was just like I had tried this out and *I never ever wanted to go back*.
> And I just wanted to get rid of everything in my closet and replace it all.
> And I actually burst out crying once. I was supposed to be going to work and
> I picked up my wallet and it was this really feminine wallet,
> and I just started sobbing,
> I was like, "I can't do this anymore."
> And yeah, it was a really intense time.

Luke emphasized that shaving his head was only one of many experiences that incited him to question and examine gender and sexuality:

> It was just everything all at once,
> because it was, there was kind of a series of events and actions that led me
> to come out and I guess didn't really any know any queer people before that.
> And so it was kind of a mixture of, um, exploring my sexuality,
> but also being exposed to my first drag show,
> and the movie *Boys Don't Cry*,
> and things like that.
> And so it was all in my head when I was coming out, it was all mixed up

in one thing, sexuality and gender, and
then I shaved my head (2010).

I asked Luke to explain more of the impact of shaving her head:

I mean it was a little weird at first, a little surprising,
but I thought that it was going to be this sense of loss,
but it was actually a sense of freedom
that I didn't expect, that I wasn't prepared for.
And a lot of women came up to me and said how much they loved my hair,
and how much they wished they could shave their head, and I kept thinking,
"Well, you *could*, you just don't."
And so that was really interesting to experience that phenomenon
of all these women saying they wished they could do that,
and how I wished they would, because it was such this feeling of liberation,
and I'm sure it's different for me, because it was part of my
coming into my gender identity.
But I didn't realize how much I was affected by my hair.

[Smiles, laughs a little]. (2010)

For Luke, dressing in more masculine clothing allowed him to look more closely at how he saw himself and then how he wanted to be perceived. Luke tried to explain her gender identity to his mother, telling her,

I would rather be handsome than pretty, and
I'd rather wear a wallet in my back pocket than a purse on my shoulder,
and you know, these things don't mean that I'm trying to be a man,
they mean that I'm being *comfortable* with who I am. (2010)

The connections between external and internal perception and recognition are often thick and deeply rooted, perhaps at times inseparable, winding together how we understand ourselves and the ways in which we move through the world.

Sometimes these places where we feel comfortable, where we get a glimpse of ourselves, must show themselves, over and over, until we understand, as Neeve explained. Neeve came over to my house just after a major snowstorm blanketed the South. We sat on my couch, the recorder on the coffee table, and each had a beer. Neeve wore rectangular glasses, a loose fitting striped shirt, brown pants with belt, and hiking boots; I was dressed

similarly, in jeans, a flannel shirt, and boots. Our conversation went on for a long time, and after a couple of hours, we drove into Carrboro, where I bought him dinner and a beer, and the conversation continued.

Neeve practices yoga extensively, and he is grounded, thoughtful, and open. He has given a great deal of thought about his identity and gender; he seems to possess a deep and full understanding of himself, and a desire to get closer to the truth of things. He almost seems to regard his gender identity as an aspect of his spirituality, embracing his "differences" as a part of him. When he narrated his story, he spoke of difficult aspects of identifying as transgender, but also expressed humor and light-heartedness.

While Neeve was in college, he came out as being attracted to women and also began playing with gender.

> So I started wearing suits sometimes, going to formal dances in suits,
> stuff like that, playing around with it, said to my girlfriend,
> "Check this out, this makes sense to me, I think this is who I am,"
> and she was like, "Yeah, it makes perfect sense."
> And so it [coming out as trans] didn't really feel like that was necessary at that time,
> you know? It was more just sort of like people understood
> I was blurring those lines.

But after college, Neeve went abroad to teach in Indonesia:

> And you know you walk into a society like that,
> and the lines are just so clear,
> it was my place to fall on the side of trying to be as female as possible.
> And I was depressed as shit.
> The whole year.
> I hated it.
> I had to dress like a lady teacher.
> I hated it, oh my God.

When he came back to the States, he returned to a more masculine expression of himself, and felt that sense of liberation again:

> So once I got back to the States, I was just like, *Praise Jesus!*
> You know, "There are gay bars and I am going to be there!"
> And so I just came back and just took it easy for a year and hung out

> with my best buddy who was trans, butchy, masculine-identified,
> and we'd go out in shirts and ties all the time,
> hit the queer clubs, love on the drag queens,
> and I just had a good year coming back to myself.
> I lived in Minneapolis during that year, and then after that I moved to New York.
> New York is definitely where I
> came to full expression of myself. (2010)

Neeve moved to New York in 1997; there, he began performing drag, and met other genderqueer and trans-males. He recalled that when he first moved there, because he was on a fellowship, he tried to dress as a professional female:

> I tried for two weeks to dress in feminine garb,
> heels and silk shirts and power suits . . .
> so, um, I tried that for two weeks and I fell in love pretty quickly when I got there,
> and she like saw right through me and was like, "What the *hell* are you doing?"
> So within two or three months I just started dressing in dude's clothes, and was just
> like, "This is it, this is who I am, there is no sense in trying to fight it."
> And it's been that way ever since.
> And I've just been negotiating what that means in carving out a life for myself.
> (2010)

Neeve's language—"coming back to myself," "came to full expression of myself," and, "this is who I am"—reiterates this idea of a *coming into* one's gender identity*;* in other words, these multiple experiences are not necessarily remaking a person, but rather, making it easer to see what is already there.

Many of my consultants spoke of winding paths, with set-backs and snags; they also, however, told of doors that swung wide open, beyond which stood even more open doors. The theme of possibilities factored into the majority of the coming out/coming into narratives. When Luke shaved his head, for instance, this shattered the rules of femininity, opening up new options: "And so that was what really blew my mind, was when I came out, it was just opening this whole kind of world of possibilities" (2010). For Mo, as he grew more confident in his gender identity, he felt more comfortable that he did not present as "masculine," that he could be an effeminate or flamboyant male (2009b). Tate, in changing

his name, recalled his realization: "I just discovered I could remake myself and be whoever I wanted to be" (2009a). Rules and definitions begin to break down, fall away. New pathways of possibilities form. For some of my consultants, the concept of fluidity allowed them to construct and recognize their gender identities. Here is Neeve:

> And so the way that I think about my identity,
> in terms of the progression of it or the changes in it,
> is at this point . . . I've started giving myself six-month windows, you know,
> sort of thinking: "Okay, this is what I want to accomplish
> in the next six months, and it makes sense for me to be residing
> in this ambiguous position, if that's what I want to accomplish."
> You know, because in some ways, I was saying to a friend the other day,
> "I feel like either I need to exploit this, or I'll perish."
> You know.
>
> > And she was like, "Oh, it's not really *exploit,* but you know,
> > sort of . . . utilize, work through, and examine."
>
> That feels really necessary . . .
>
> The point is most people don't have to do that.
>
> Most people *do not* ever do that.
> Most people, they know: this is it, this is what I am,
> and we're going to move forward, and I'm going to figure out a career and
> I'm going to have a relationship and
> I have NO angst about how I'm read in terms of gender.
> So, you know. And obviously I can get—you can get jealous of those people,
> of the simplicity that must exist in that.
> But, um, I think at this point there's always going to be something that feels,
> I mean, sometimes, it feels, like: is there concealment or deception, you know, and
>
> > how does that exist within identity? And I feel like in some ways that's always
> > going to exist within my identity, regardless of what shape I take,
> > and I feel like that's true for a lot of people who have stepped outside of the
> > traditional bounds
>
> of whatever gender and sex are. (2010)

If gender identity is uncontained and undefined, while the possibilities present a kind of joyous freedom, the lack of boundaries and borders can also create a feeling of anxiety or angst. To have "no angst about how I'm read in terms of gender" may seem, at times, like a welcoming relief. But Neeve also considers this angst a part of his experience in the world; in

a sense, because he has "stepped outside of the traditional bounds," he must "utilize" his gender fluidity to create a new, more inclusive and imaginative space.

Tate grows excited when he talks about the possibilities, the freedom in expressing multiple genders, but he also admits his own difficulty in letting go of a particular presentation and language that feels right for him.

> And I'm always—I encourage, like because I can be rather old-fashioned
> based on because I do identify as more of an old school butch kind of person . . .
> I have a very traditional way. But I'm also wide open and I LOVE,
> I love to be challenged and I love to be pushed,
> [with] gender and sexuality in that same way. Oh, like when Billy* started
> identifying as a fag you know and he's like,
> "I'm female bodied and I can be masculine and I can go by she and I prefer she, but
> I'm totally a gay boy, look at me flame." You know—that was so revolutionary for
> this community three years ago, they're like, "*What*? We don't understand."
> And I think that is the beauty of gender and that is the amazingness of it,
> is when you can really just be exactly who you are
> and push those boundaries
> and not worry about it.
> I mean I wish I could paint my nails and wear a cute little dress sometimes.
>
> CS: I'm sure you could, Tate.
>
> Well, of course, I could. But you know I physically can do that,
> but my own, my internal gender stuff will NOT let me do that,
> not in public, not in this—because I feel really secure in my gender. (2010d)

Our own boundaries and limits also influence the way we come into, construct, and express our identities. For example, most transgender males, no matter how comfortable in their male identities, would not feel okay with pushing boundaries by wearing a skirt. Fluidity, then, may also present some limits or borders.

The boundaries of gender outside of which my consultants are stepping do not simply disappear. The deeply entrenched gender binary may push us, occasionally, into spaces of anxiety, worry, or confusion, where we doubt our identities, we forget how to speak our language, we capitulate.

Here is Luke:

But that said, there are days that are hard,
and I find I find myself needing a voice
to say it's okay to be this way,
because there just is a lot of pressure from the outside world.
And it's hard to realize just how much it gets in your head,
the idea that you're fucked up,
or that you're not supposed to be this way, or whatever.
And I like . . . fucking with things and I like, I like confusing people.
I like when people can't identify what I am, when I feel safe about it,
when I feel confident, you know,
but there are other times when I just don't want to deal with it.
And I have to deal with it because of people's reactions,
and that's just frustrating.
And—I feel like as far as how people perceive me,
I think right now I'm going through a period of time where I would like to be more,
I would like to be more often thought to be male,
it's like I don't want to *be* male,
but I like when people think I'm a male
because then
. . . then it's fucking with things,
you know what I mean?
And I feel like it's frustrating to always be perceived as female because it's not recognizing all of me.
And so I like to . . . I like to be more ambiguous,
and I feel like for whatever reason, like the clothes and the hair, and having a more professional job . . . and just being around a community that's more accepting—ironically the more queer people there are in the community, the more people that read me as female because where there's not queer people, people assume, they just can't fathom that I could be a woman.
So, but you know that's the phase that I'm in right now.
But that could change.
Shortly. (2010)

This *voice* that Luke speaks about, "a voice to say it's okay to be this way," is crucial for trans-males to listen to, and to assert. This voice is not singular, but rather is multi-layered, expressive, and sometimes fragile. Finding the language is necessary; finding a voice is even more critical. We might spend a lifetime of figuring things out, and when we find recognition, language, understanding, support, we might begin to understand ourselves: but we also need a voice in which to assert these identities. Because we also choose these paths, create these masculinities, we must claim and assert them.

As trans-identified males are expressing new kinds of narratives that involve both constructing and coming into one's gender identities, they are also creating spaces of possibilities. In an email to me, Mo emphasized that the empowerment and liberation of this space emerges from actively *choosing* and creating one's identity. I will let his astute words close this chapter:

> *There's something very freeing about being able to make the choice to transition and be a not-very-masculine dude who likes cute animals and crafts and baking. I am not trying to delve into the 'is being gay/queer/trans/etc. a choice' debate because my thought is that it doesn't matter if it is or not, since there's nothing wrong with whatever identity people may have, but I have made some very conscious choices along the way and it's been awesome. I just assumed I would go to college, marry a straight guy, have some kids, etc. and when I realized that I didn't have to do it, my entire life opened up. That's kind of why I had the sexual identity and gender identity shift around the same time—I never felt like I could explore something else, and when I realized one thing could change, I understood that everything could.* (2009a).

March 20, 2010

You're obsessed with studying people and what defines their genders. You stare at men. Their jaw lines, stubble, flat chests. You notice men whose legs are nearly hairless. Men without facial hair. You see a slim guy in tight jeans and T-shirt, his face smooth, his hair shaggy: why does he get read as male, what are the subtle differences, what are the nuances? You listen closely to voices, noticing when a man has a high pitch. Thinking about it constantly, always watching people, makes you a little bit crazy. Especially when you're also wondering how everyone is perceiving you.

Chapter 3
Bodies: Not a Fixed Process

I don't know that it would be accurate
to say that my body doesn't match,
or didn't match who I was.
-Stephen (2008)

My body is my body.
-Tate (2009a)

All of my consultants, at some point in their narratives, describe their gender identity as linked to *feeling*; they express comfort, happiness, and anxiety about ways their gender identities play out in their daily lives. While a large portion of their conversations address conceptual ideas about gender identity, such as the fluidity, my consultants also ground their narratives in the reality of day-to-day experiences—how they are perceived by others, how they move through the world. The majority of my consultants, if not all, regard gender as separate from the body; they also, however, speak to the significance of the body. The body, after all, is this lived-in thing, always a part of our daily lives, and for trans-identified males the body operates as both a "coming out" and "coming into" one's identity. The body, Luke said, "is a complicated part of it" (2010).

Popular media tends to present transgender lives as narratives of before/after, focusing on medical changes of the body without leaving room for narratives of contradictions, fluidity, and hybridity. This rhetoric tends to focus on which "parts" of the body are "real" or how the person suffered by being "trapped in the wrong body," implying that the trans-person is "inauthentic" or must "fix" something, that once he makes the body "right," he can (re)enter society. None of my consultants questioned the realness of their

bodies, and none expressed ideas of trying "to get out" of their bodies; instead, I would argue, trans-identified males—by embracing, altering, and (re)constructing their bodies—in a sense bring their bodies *into* themselves.

Transgender males may or may not chose to medically transition, which could include breast reconstruction (top surgery), genital surgery, a hysterectomy, or taking testosterone (T). Top surgery and T are the most popular forms of transitioning. Of my consultants, two have had top surgery, and three take testosterone. The experiences of those who medically transition are quite different than the experiences of those who do not. However, I believe that rather than contradicting or undoing each other, these experiences illuminate my argument that trans-identified males create uncontained spaces of masculinity that exist outside of the boundaries of the gender binary. The experience of transitioning does not always follow a single linear narrative that begins or ends in medicalization; nor does the decision to medically transition prescribe only one kind of masculinity or trans-identity.

Further, I do not want to downplay the discomfort, pain, or disconnect that many trans-males feel about their bodies. Body narratives can be both heartbreaking and freeing. The body is a huge part of figuring out how to move through the world, how to present ourselves, how to be seen. Yet, after listening to my consultants, I believe that it is crucial that society find new ways of talking about transgender bodies. My consultants do not describe their bodies as something shameful or disgusting; they do not describe a clear split between the body and their emotional feelings; they do not describe wanting a completely different body. Some of my consultants feel more comfortable with their bodies than others; some want to change aspects of their bodies so that they *feel more themselves,* or so that others recognize them for *who they are*. Although none of my consultants told me that they "feel

trapped," I do not want to diminish the reality that some people may feel this way, or that many trans-people feel deeply anxious about or disconnected from their bodies; indeed, all of my consultants have experienced at least some level of disconnect to or discomfort with their bodies. But this does not mean that their bodies dictate and essentialize their genders; rather, the multi *experiences* of the body encourage a new path of possibilities. In this chapter, my consultants speak about top surgery, binding, T, and sex, articulating how their bodies relate to the construction of their trans-identities.

I mean I definitely would prefer to have pecs
-Ryan (2009)

Breasts are visible markers of the female body that sometimes affect how transgender males are perceived by others, how they see themselves, and how they express their masculinities. Trans-identified males may or may not choose to reconstruct their chests, or to de-emphasize the visibility of their chests.[7] Surgery is not for everyone, and at least two of my consultants do not bind on a daily basis. However, all of my consultants feel at least the occasional desire for a flat chest.

The main types of top surgery are bilateral mastectomy (double incision) or peri-areolar incision (keyhole); the purpose is to remove the breast tissue, to construct a male chest. Depending on the kind of surgery and the chest, the nipples might be trimmed, repositioned, grafted. Sometimes sensation doesn't return. Revisions are often required. On several websites, transgender males post pictures of their newly constructed chests, with information on doctors, costs, problems, and their overall satisfaction. At two different workshops I attended at queer conferences, transgender males stood in front of the crowd, bearing flat chests, scars, tattoos, and piercings. They talked about their surgeries and

[7] I switch back and forth between the terms "breasts" and "chests"; in speaking with my consultants and other trans-males, I've noticed that most tend to refer to their female "breasts" as their chest, a way perhaps to reclaim their bodies and language.

answered endless questions. They were proud, happy, comfortable. They were saying, "This is possible."

Stephen, like many transgender-males, held a benefit party to help with the costs of his surgery. The trans community tends to step up when a member needs help. People contribute money. Clean the wounds. Teach each other how to inject T. Tell their stories, answer questions, provide guidance. Stephen had chest reconstruction surgery a few months after he'd started T. When I talked to him, it had been four months since the surgery. He spoke with excitement as he told me about the *feeling* of having a male chest. Chest surgery is a major event to the body, a re-shaping, a re-building. For Stephen, reconstructing his chest helped him to feel more himself, similar to the way that using male pronouns brought him closer to himself. He recalled for me the first time, after surgery, that he went outside bare-chested:

> Because after you have surgery you still have to wear a binder
> for a month after you have surgery.
> And the first time I didn't have to wear a binder anymore,
> and it was hot as shit,
> and I just went outside without my shirt on
> and it's sort of the same feeling—
> it's just incredible and
> it just *feels right*. (2008)

Stephen also told me that he'd felt more certain about top surgery than he felt about testosterone. We were sitting in his living room on an autumn day. I asked him how he felt with his body, before the surgery. I could see him, thinking about his words. Stephen used to speak on panels and conduct workshops on transgender issues, and he feels comfortable in trying to teach people. Sunlight fell across his face.

> I think that . . . hmm,
> I think that I wasn't—
> I don't know that it would be accurate to say that my body doesn't *match*,
> or didn't match, who I was.

> I think that I wasn't comfortable having breasts and I didn't want to and—
> and that was really clear to me and that I felt pretty definitive about that . . .
> from pretty early on. I mean
> I don't think I was ever comfortable having breasts. I mean
> I guess a lot of people aren't, and, I mean,
> I fucking hated having breasts. (2008)

His voice sped up as he concluded: *I fucking hated having breasts*. The words were blunt, but they did not seep with anger or misery; his tone sounded tired, almost conciliatory. He also stressed that he didn't draw an easy parallel between his body and his gender; through his language, his picking through the words, he *tells* me the complexity of his feelings. The word "comfortable" appears twice here, and comes up in many of my consultants' narratives when they speak about their bodies. If any particular body-narrative links these stories, perhaps it is the desire to *feel comfortable* in how one moves through the world and in his own skin. This kind of *comfort* that trans-males seek or may find unexpectedly is not only about relieving discomfort, but about realizing a new kind of space with their bodies, a liberating, comfortable space.

Transgender males often re-shape the body as a part of our daily lives—with clothing, binding, posture. For many of us, making subtle shifts to the body, in order to find that *comfort*, almost becomes an unconscious part of movement. Tate told me, "I know with my body I totally slouch. I totally hide my chest as much as I can; it's a *comfort* thing. Yeah, it sucks. . . I love being able to wear a t-shirt with nothing on" (2010d). Discomfort with the chest then may re-shape or alter the body, in ways that are different from the effects of surgery. Stephen also said, "And I mean I have horrible posture still and I think, I mean all of—a lot of—fucking trans-guys have horrible posture because they slouch because they don't want to accent their breasts in any way" (2008). Slouching is a physical discomfort, and yet offers trans-males a way to *feel* more comfortable in their bodies and in their presentation.

Feeling uncomfortable with one's chest does not necessarily *lead* to surgery; I do not want to draw a neat line of causality. The different paths of my consultants present a multitude of directions. The first time I interviewed Tate, in the early summer, we were sitting outside of Fuse on a warm summer night, drinking PBRs, basking in the last light of the day. He enjoyed talking about his gender identity. He answered my questions with candidness and clarity, mapping out his personal path and opening a door, for me, to ponder *his* trans-experiences.

> I have *no* intentions of having top surgery, and in fact, I am coming into a place
> where I probably will have a child at some point,
> and that's important to me that I have the equipment I have
> in order to have a child. So it's not—I don't feel like I have any kind of conflict.
> It's certainly not trapped in the wrong body,
> like, *My body is my body,*
> It's fine.
> My body is my body. (2009a)

Earlier, I had told Tate of my idea to present alternative narratives to the one that often gets told, which he addresses in his response: "It's certainly not trapped in the wrong body." But he takes this declaration a step further; he also *claims* his body: "My body is my body." For Tate, questions about what he wants to *do* with his body also influence his decision to not medically transition. Not that chest surgery is not attractive, he assured me less than a minute later.

> I mean, the chest surgery is enticing, it's totally enticing,
> because I have a chest, and besides my voice,
> it's the thing that gives me away right away.
> And I hate binding. You know, it's uncomfortable. I mean, it feels hot to me when I dress up in my shirt and tie and I'm binding,
> like I feel good about that.
> But a lot of my friends who are trans-identified bind everyday, you know,
> and I'm just—I can't, you know.
> It goes along with the whole not-transitioning process for me.
> Because I feel like, *I see myself the way I see myself*,
> which is very much a boy,
> and the friends, who I love very dearly, see me that way too (2009a).

Tate uses the metaphor of sight, of perception, to claim his identity. He and his friends share the same *view* of his identity, regardless of his physical body. The need to be seen as male, and thus understood as male, is more important than his desire to alter his body through surgery or daily binding. But Tate also has experienced periods where he felt more concerned about binding. Things shift, people change. Leave a door open. Listen to yourself. In all of our conversations, I could feel Tate wanting me to grasp these concepts, wanting me to relax into myself.

Eight months after the first recording, after many conversations and a growing closeness between us, I recorded Tate again. He spoke with the same kind of confidence and thoughtfulness. But this time, he also seemed tired, a little frustrated. He challenged me for overestimating his comfort with his body and the path he has carved out for himself. He wanted me to know that he also experienced moments of pain or discomfort with his body; he wanted me to know that he also experienced jolts of anxiety when his friends faltered, when their vision clouded.

> My friends totally see me as a guy—not a guy
> but as male-identified,
> and they totally respect my gender, and yet, it makes me want to *vomit*
> to think about getting naked and getting into a hot tub with them.
> And I have done that before—I didn't vomit—
> but I have to completely disassociate, completely cut myself off from my body,
> which kind of counter-effects the hot tub experience. But you know.
> Awful, I feel awful, I feel completely not okay with that.
> And I don't feel supported. Even if that situation,
> where I'm like, "I don't feel very comfortable,"
> and it's not like people are like, "Okay, well we won't look, we'll be really
> respectful," and then Kelly's* like,
> "I've never seen you naked before!"
> You know.
> "Oh my god, I didn't know you had such big boobs!"
>
> [He raises the pitch of his voice, imitating her and we both laugh].
>
> Can you *imagine*? (2010d)

His tone is incredulous but playful. The body, at once public and private, is also a space of conflict and possibility. The hot tub moment showed Tate that the teaching never ends; he must show his friends how to understand him, to look past their assumptions and misconceptions, to fully *see* him. The possibilities of transgender experiences, often glorious, are not always easy places. We move through the world in these heavy, material things which sometimes seem unable to contain the lightness of our identities.

Later in the conversation, Tate's voice grew impatient:

> Why does everyone else get this privilege of feeling
> comfortable in their bodies?
> You know, most people feel uncomfortable in some ways:
> "Oh, my breasts are too small," "oh, my breasts are too big," "oh, I'm too fat," "oh, I'm too skinny," "oh, I don't look good."
> But it's just different.
> It's really really different.
> And it's really hard. (2010d)

Then his voice quieted, and he shrugged. He added, with a kind of acceptance, "We all got shit to work through, you know," and moved on.

Stephen and Tate's narratives of comfort and visibility teach us a way to read the body, and its connection to gender-identity. All of my consultants spoke at some point about their discomfort or disconnect with their bodies, or of their desire for a more masculinized body, which often connected to *perception*. Neeve, so grounded in his fluidity and maleness, expressed to me those occasional moments when a look in the mirror causes a jolt:

> And so there are times when I can look at myself in the mirror
> and sort of be taken aback, and you know there's some level of discord.
> You know there are times I'll look in the mirror
> and I'll be like,
> "Aw, man, I wish my shoulders were bigger,"
> you know, there's that critique,
> and that critique definitely runs through my head. (2010)

But the critique also disappears. More often, Neeve looks in the mirror and is happy; more often, he fully sees himself. Feelings of (dis)comfort appear, disappear, shift.

Chase told me that going on testosterone has made him *feel more comfortable* in the world, but he believes that top surgery would make him feel more confident.

> I feel much better. At least when I go out in public. I mean,
> because I haven't had chest surgery,
> yet. I worry about that a little bit.
>
> CS: Are you—
>
> I'm wearing a compression shirt. You can't tell, can you?
>
> CS: You can't tell.
>
> Okay. Is it like I got pecs?
>
> CS: It does look—
>
> It makes me look more muscular? (2009)

Chase's "break" in the interview to ask if I could discern that he had a "female" chest also connects to the theme of perceptions and visibility, and exemplifies how the public aspect of the body reinforces or challenges our gender identities. Many of us study ourselves in mirrors to see if our chests appear flat. We ask our friends or lovers for feedback. We wait and see if the clerk will address us as "sir" or "ma'am." Not because, necessarily, we want to "pass," but because we want to be *recognized.*

***

A word about binding.

A compression shirt is also known as a binder. People also choose to bind with Ace bandages, or sports bras a size too small. But the compression shirt/vest seems to be the most popular method. Only two online companies—one based in Taiwan, the other in Miami, Florida—manufacture them. Binders are expensive. Uncomfortable. And in the summers, unbearably hot. There are a variety of binders, but basically, they come in two shapes. One stretches down to the hips, the other stops below the chest. They are difficult to get on, and to take off. Binders press down on the breasts, flatten them. To get the fullest effect, you might wear two. You

might wear a thin t-shirt underneath the binder so that your skin breathes. You might wear two t-shirts overtop of the binder so that the shape of the binder does not show. If you're unsure which binder to buy, go online and type in 'binders and FTMs.' Trans-guys post pictures and detailed reviews. You can also watch "how to" videos. You can buy or donate used binders. Sometimes binders make it a little difficult to breathe. When you get home and you're alone, you'll want to strip it off. But here is the other thing, that for some of us, binders allow us to feel ourselves, or at least, pretty damn close. Some don't get dressed without putting one on. For some, when we're not wearing one we feel out of sorts. A little less confident. A little more self-conscious.

***

Ryan is rangy, with shaggy hair, a sweet smile, and a flat chest. A part of Ryan's "coming into" his trans-identity involved de-emphasizing the visibility of his breasts. He partly credits binding with encouraging others to perceive him as male, which coincided with him embracing his trans identity—a kind of merging of the private and public, a coming out and a coming in.

> So yeah,
> when I first met Sara*,
> which was when I was a senior and was 2004, or 5,
> I wasn't binding at all during the day, in my day-to day life,
> just when I was performing drag.
> But that was it.
> And then I think, I think there was—once I starting going to a job
> and getting called "he" all the time—again it was also . . . building up this pressure,
> like if all these people are calling me "he" then I probably need to, again,
> go through these efforts, so it's not questioned.
> You know, at least around looking like I'm male in my daily life.
> So that was around—in 2006 was around when I started binding every day.
>
> CS: You bind everyday still?
>
> Yeah. And actually since that time, I guess maybe 2007, 2008, is when I started to double bind.
>
> CS: Whoa, serious binding.

Yeah, and now I can't even go back to single binding anymore. (2009)

On one hand, Ryan recognizes the performance of gender: since his co-workers were already reading him as male, he felt a "pressure" to "go through these efforts" to read consistently as male, to not rupture the public reading. On the other hand, binding brought him closer to himself, so much so that now he "can't even go back to single binding anymore." Thus, Ryan's double-binding may relieve a kind of discomfort that he feels with his chest or being perceived as female, but it also functions as something deeper, as a way to open up this new space of being. For Ryan, binding also provides an alternative to surgery:

> Yeah, I'm afraid to have surgery.
> I'm afraid.
> I don't know. If I could just take a pill that would make my body—
>
> [He smiles, then both of us laugh.]
>
> Well, that's basically T.
>
> **But** if it would make me—
> I mean I definitely would prefer to have pecs instead of breasts.
> I guess.
> But, yeah, surgery, and plus having to have a fund raiser and everything, it seems like a pain.
>
> [He laughs again].
>
> And also . . . binding works. You know.
> I mean it's not ideal but . . . I feel like
> it's getting the job done. (2009)

The "job" is, on one level, to present to the public one's male-identity, but the "job" also encompasses something deeper and more personal, a way of being that feels comfortable and right. As we talked about binding, Ryan and I "broke" from the framework of the interview into discussion—which binders worked the best, which didn't work so well, etc. We were sitting in the back room of the Open Eye, where a few other people were studying.

If they were listening to our conversation, neither of us cared. We were exchanging a kind of cultural knowledge, passing on traditions.

Comfort for trans-identified males operates on two levels—the comfort in how one is seen by others, as with Ryan at his job, *and* comfort in one's self, which consultants express as a *feeling*. The metaphor of comfort with one's body and in one's identity, resonates more accurately for my consultants than the metaphor of feeling *trapped*. This comfort, however one chooses to construct it, also invites trans-identified males to step into a new kind of space where they express and claim their masculinity.

To T or not to T?

-Neeve (2010)

Testosterone gives a person more muscle mass, increased facial and body hair, and a deeper voice. Menstruation stops. The clitoris grows. The face may change shape. Sex drive increases. Body fat redistributes. Some of these changes take a few months, some take years. Most people inject T, weekly or bi-weekly. The topical cream works more slowly, and it's expensive. Testosterone gives transgender males a physical way to construct a more visible male body, much like top surgery does. Sometimes transgender males stop using T, only taking their body to a particular level of "maleness" that feels comfortable to them. Most of the effects are reversible, except for the voice and the increased hair. Stephen at one point talked about stopping T, said he wouldn't mind if some of those "female" characteristics returned, though he also pointed out that many trans-males would feel uncomfortable with that.

Stephen, Mo, and Chase spoke about T as an important part of their transition, and expressed that the physical changes allowed them to *feel* better, gave them a different way of moving through the world. "The thing about it is, I feel a whole lot more stable and grounded taking testosterone than I did not taking testosterone," explained Stephen. "And I

don't know if that's because I'm more comfortable in the world, that I feel more grounded and stable, or if that's actually hormonal" (2008). Chase told me, "I feel a lot better about myself. . . . I feel a lot better about myself when I go into store, or when I go into the bathroom. When I'm out in public, I just feel so much better" (2009). Mo, who has been on T for four and half years, said that he feels "more happy with my body than ever" (2009b).

In terms of others' perception, typically those who take T will be read consistently as men. For Stephen, once he began to transition on T, he could outwardly present his gender identity in a way that made sense to him: "I wanted the physical characteristics to go with my name and my pronoun. It's hard. It's hard to be in that limbo space where you're like, 'Oh, I'm identifying as male, and people are reading you as female"' (2008). Mo agreed that now "people are not puzzling over my gender presentation" (2009b). T provides more a defined gender space, and the genderqueer space tends to shrink. But, not always. And this does not mean one's gender *identity* necessarily grows more defined.

Mo, for example, feels happy that he is on T and reads as male, but he also embraces the fluidity of his identity. We sat at his kitchen table, with one of his cats occasionally turning to watch us. Mo talked quickly, his hands flitting. When I asked him what it was like to always "pass" as male, he said, it "can be very tricky. [I'm] not really sure. I've been feeling less male, more genderqueer. . . . Most people are reading me as a guy, but there is discomfort there," he explained, because he is "a queer person. I don't want to retreat in this heteronormative life" (2009b).

To be on T perhaps gives a person a more defined space, which can relieve the stress of being in that "limbo space." All of my consultants using testosterone made it very clear that they feel happy about their decision, and I could see their happiness, their comfort and satisfaction. But they also encountered new questions about their identities and daily

interactions. The shift in how others' perceive my consultants affirms their male identities, but this shift also may create its own set of anxieties. Mo told me that he did not like to be mistaken as a heterosexual white guy, which was why he felt it was important for him to be "out" as transgender. Stephen talked to me about the great comfort that medically transitioning has brought him, but also articulated some of the difficulties:

> I think that I thought that when I physically transitioned
> that I would be a lot more comfortable in the world in terms of the way society
> perceives me and I think that's true to some extent. But I think the real—
> I mean, people read me as male and that's great and whatever.
> And I think the thing that feels really *important* to me is that I individually
> and personally feel so much more comfortable with myself and all the parts
> of myself more so than I ever did before I started to transition.
> And so I think that what I thought I was going to happen was:
> All of a sudden I would be read as male and everything would be great and
> that would be the thing that would feel really important to me and
> that would really sort of change things for me, and
> that hasn't really been what's happened. And that has actually been harder
> for me than what I thought it would be.
> Because it's hard for me to be consistently read as male,
> like I feel like I've lost . . . parts of my identity
> that I didn't necessarily—or wasn't quite ready to—let go of.
> And I think most people in Carrboro and the people that know me
> still read me as queer, but when I walk into [other places] I get read
> as a straight guy.
> I don't really like that that much. (2008)

Stephen again reiterates that by transitioning, he now feels "so much more comfortable with myself and all the parts of myself." He feels more comfortable in the world. However, Stephen's articulation of the complexity of medically transitioning, the beauty of what he has gained combined with loss, struck me as a story we often do not hear in the queer world. Not a story of sadness or regret or unhappiness. But also not a story that is 100% celebratory. He talked with honesty and eloquence, and tried to show me what transitioning felt like for him.

***

The physical effects and the more defined gender space of T both lures and unnerves some of us. We are undecided. We think about it. For some of us, we think about it a lot. We may watch videos on YouTube that document the changes. We read, ask questions. We stare at men's faces, wondering. We stare at our own faces, wondering. Some days, we want it, we want it badly. Other days, we only want parts of it. Other times, we think, "This is who we are, genderqueers, fucking the binary." Or, we ask, "Aren't we still male, can't we be male, like this? Or like this? How much do we have to change our physical bodies?" Or, "How much do we want to change them?" The unknown beckons us. We're peering over the edge.

***

Ryan is undecided. Ryan, he thinks about T.

What is unappealing about it is the unknown.
Like the scientific unknown, the side effects of T, and long term,
all that kind of stuff.
And then I guess the unknown of what it would be like for me:
. . . how will I react to it, how will I be different?
You know—I wish I could . . . know for myself.
What would be the same, what would be different?
It just feels like it's—just the transition,
feels really intense.
To do that.
I guess those are the biggest things I'm cautious about.
And then the positives would be—I mean I guess the other thing is . . .
I mean I think if I was just in the queer world,
and I didn't have to interact with, not straight people,
but just people that call you "ladies,"
it wouldn't be such a problem.
Like I'm fine with my gender right now.
And I'm fine with the way I'm perceived.
And I don't even need to be male . . . it's working out okay.
It's just . . . every now and again—
there's not all that many *moments*,
but there are moments—
where I just run into something
that I feel could possibly be solved by being on T,
by having a more defined gender. (2009)

I listen to Ryan winding his way through the multiple attractions and fears, and feel as if he is expressing everything I've been trying to find my way through. "You know—I wish I could . . . know for myself. What would be the same, what would be different?" he asks, and I nod, "yes, I know." The wondering sometimes consumes. The body sometimes speaks too quietly, or presents too many possibilities. Ryan grappled with the way the body connects to the narrative of identity.

> I think that's another reason why the "wrong body thing"
> because I think it . . . it creates this false idea that you go from one side of the spectrum to the other,
> like it's that simple:
> total male to total female.
> And I think that . . .
> I think in terms of the spectrum, and I guess that's also—
> sorry to go back to all these questions but that's making me think,
> I think that also a little bit why I'm shying away from T also is because—
> I don't know—
> I don't think necessarily that all the female parts of me are bad.
> I like for it to be complicated.
> Although, I don't know,
> I think I could still be on T and be faggy, and all that stuff too.
> But I think that my masculinity is definitely a not very macho masculinity.
> I'm pretty faggy. (2009)

How does the body reveal, embrace, become our masculinity? My consultants claim a diversity of masculinities. Butch, femme, "faggy," and many more undefined or shifting. Ryan's feelings about the fluidity of the spectrum characterize the way the majority of my consultants feel, whether or not they've medically transitioned. I can hear Ryan working himself through the ideas; I'm with him. He wonders if T will define him in a different way, but then seems to reach this place in his narrative where he decides that T will not take away his identity. That for people such as Stephen, Chase, and Mo, T helped them to express who they felt themselves to be. T will not make him macho, but it would change things.

Conversations about T always focused on the physical aspects, along with statements or questions about one's feelings, and how these aspects intersect with identity. In my first recording of Tate, he was as adamant about not going on T as he as about surgery.

> You know, it's like I don't need to change the other parts of me,
> and so I think that's a marked difference.
> I don't know very many people in my position
> who are male-identified—
> and believe me, I have struggled with it—
> you know this is not something that I've come to easily,
> and like I said, it's not a fixed process, it's not a fixed identity, it's where I am
> and it's where I've done a lot of thinking to be at, you know,
> and I just, if I take T, sure am I curious?
> Absolutely.
> I hear wonderful things about your sex drive, your peaks,
> and, you know, you work out and you can get muscles, and . . .
> your voice drops, you know—all these amazing things.
> But it also is a huge step to becoming a man and identifying as a man,
> and for me, I do NOT identify as a man, anymore than I identify as a woman.
> And so, it does me no good to take T, because then I go out into the world,
> and everyone sees me as a *man*—that helps me none.
> You know, it's—it doesn't, it's not my identity.
> And so, it's—you know—it doesn't—I mean, sure, it maybe gets me closer,
> to that identity I feel, but it's not enough to alter—
> you know . . . chemically alter myself.
> And so, that's huge, that's really important, you know.
> And my big thing is people need to *see me* for who I am, as I am.
> I shouldn't have to change my body in order to fit their image of what they think
> I am, based on what I say I am.
> That one you might have to play back a couple of times.
>
> [He laughs].
>
> But you know what I mean?
> And those are really fundamentally really important things . . . . (2009a)

The narrative is rich with Tate's concerns, and assertions, of who he feels himself to be. T, like surgery, is enticing for him, but in the end, he feels that "it's not my identity." He uses the narrative of fluidity and perception to continue to frame his understanding of himself; if people read him as a "man," that is not 100% accurate: "my big thing is people need to *see me* for who I am." For Tate, possessing his body in a kind of unchanged form seems important

in articulating his male-identified body. For other consultants, including T in their transitioning brought them closer to themselves and who they understand themselves to be.

Neeve thinks about T. He's been thinking about it for years. "Yeah, I guess it's this whole question: to T or not to T? To alter my shape or to not, right?" He smiles, then says, "And I think the ways that I'm thinking about it now are not questions of *whether* I'll do it, but when I'll do it." Neeve pays attention to these thoughts. Even this experience of *thinking* so much about gender takes us to a different kind of space.

> I think, I just remind myself, "Neevel,
> most people don't go through their day thinking about taking hormones,
> at least once a day."
> Most people just don't have that experience.
> Most people aren't like, "Okay,
> to cut off my breasts or not to cut off my breasts," you know?
> And so, it's good for me to step back and be okay . . .
> The fact that I'm *having* that dialogue with myself is . . .
> that's something to pay attention to, right?
> And I haven't come to any conclusions about it,
> but I am—I do accept
> that yes, there is gender dysphoria
> and
> I have it.
>
> [We both laugh] (2010)

Thank goodness for the laughter. Our conversation is light-hearted and playful, but articulates these very real concerns, anxieties, and fears. My consultants' different narratives and voices illuminated for me the flexibility and fluidity of transgender identities. We all had commonalities, overlapping parts, yet they also showed me there was not one way of being transgender.

But I was still learning.

The next night, after I interviewed Neeve, I recorded Tate again. The country road on which I lived was still slippery, a mess of slush and ice, but Tate wanted to come to my

place. I bought us beer, and he showed up around 9:30 p.m. We sat on my couch, the recorder and microphone set up on the coffee table.

About midway through, I asked Tate how often he thought about T. I knew from his first interview that he did not want to take T, but I also knew that he had considered it. I wanted to know *how often* he thought about it. I wanted someone else to confirm their near obsession in thinking about it. I wanted my friend Tate, so secure in his gender identity, to tell me we were on the same path. My guess was that he, earlier in his transition, thought endlessly about T, but decided against to go in a different direction. From my own experience, it seemed that one would not decide *not* to medically transition without first seriously considering it, without weighing the advantages and disadvantages. Perhaps at this point, informed and biased by my own experiences, I viewed the decision to medically transition or not to as this clear crossroads, in one must make one choice or the other; but my consultants showed me that in some cases, it's not a crossroads but more of spiral that spins off in many different directions.

> Like I *never*—
> I don't know that I've ever
> sat around unprovoked, and thought,
> or, not for a long time,
> "What would it be like to take some T?" (2010d)

I was surprised. I'd known Tate now for ten months, and didn't realize that T hadn't, at least at some point, consumed his thoughts. He'd thought about it, obviously, but he felt like he thought about it in a different way.

He continued to tell me about a lesbian friend of his who'd recently joked about taking T, and so that sparked his curiosity again, but in a playful imaginary way.

> When that comes up, then I think about it, then I'm like, well.
> Then I'm like, "Oh yeah,
> I would love to take a quarter dose or a half dose,
> I would love to feel what that feels like.

I would love—
I would love to have a scruffy beard that I could pet and shave, and
I would love to have the masculine cheek bones, muscle structure—
I would love that feeling, in my imagination, for, like, a minute."
But it's not—but then I always come back out of that,
and I'm, like, "but that's not *who I am*,
that's not what I want to do to my body."
And then I'm like, "Oh God, I would love to have top surgery,
these things [breasts] are annoying, they're such a . . . gender clue.
And it doesn't feel right."
But then I think about it, and I'm, like,
"My body would look so weird without my breasts.
It would look like, *not mine*."
You know.
And so . . . you had this body for all these years, what is that experience like,
to all of a sudden—
to change that dramatically . . .

CS: I know. I think about it. I feel like I think about it every day.
Surgery, or T.
A lot. Um. Sometimes I think—I mean,
I love flat chests. And just to be able to put on a T-shirt.
[My voice softens] and not bind and wear layers and everything.

Right, totally.

CS: But then . . .
But it's a huge deal, you know.
It's a big surgery. It's invasive. It doesn't always turn out. It's expensive.
Like, it's a lot of things. I mean, I might do it. I mean,
sometimes I feel like I'm more prone to that even that T.

Yeah.

CS: A flat chest. (2010d)

We break into talking for a while about others who have flat chests. We're laughing through most of the conversation, wondering why sometimes feminine girls have such flat chests. Then, I return to my thoughts about surgery.

CS: I don't know. I think about it. We'll see.
I don't know.

Tate nods, leans back against the couch cushion, looks at his beer, then looks at me.

Yeah, see and I think that's, I think that's *important* for you to realize.

> That's obviously important enough. And you just have to figure out,
> *"Is this important, is this important enough, are the risks worth it*?"
> I mean for me, I want to have a baby.
> The day I decide I don't want to have a child
> is the day I will start seriously considering if I want to have top surgery.
> And until that day comes, it won't ever be an issue. (2010d)

Tate has told me that he *is* in a more confident and secure place in his gender identity than I am, but that doesn't mean that we're not on the same path. Maybe we are, maybe not. For me, my consultants' understandings of themselves present this brilliant continuum of possibilities. But even with all of the possibilities, this emergent space is not chaos. Rather, each person makes a path that takes him closer into his own self. As my consultants shared their experiences with me, they were, in a way, also leading me, not in crazy different directions, but closer to myself.

Possibilities shift, open up, close. Ryan goes through periods where he thinks often of T, and other periods where those thoughts quell. The same holds true for Neeve. Mo said he thought about T for a couple of years and then considered it with great seriousness for about six months before he started. Endless questions about the physical traits occupied him; he worried about body fat distribution, and wondered, "Will having body hair gross me out," or, "Will the physical changes I don't want going to outweigh the ones I do want?" (2009b). But now, four and a half years later, he feels more comfortable in his body than he ever did before, and the physical characteristics feel right.

Luke also has spent time considering T and surgery, and he feels settled that he does not want to go in those directions; however, he also leaves a window open. Luke stressed often that she was speaking only from personal experience, and was not trying to make any statements about transgender or genderqueer identities. I reassured Luke that I wanted to depict multiple experiences.

For Luke, accepting that she didn't want to medically transition helped her to understand and affirm her gender-identity and its fluidity.

> I'm, at this point, I'm pretty, I'm feeling pretty set that I'm not—at least any time in the near future—doing any kind of biological, any medical transitions.
> And the body is a complicated part of it.
> And I think [this] was one of the hardest things to figure out in terms of—
> the hardest things to get out of the concept of,
> "Well if you want this, then you must be that."
> Because that's where I feel like a lot of the pressure comes from.
> Because . . . if you want this body, then that means you identify as man or woman or whatever. So—
> I, you know,
> my feelings about my body change also and I'm still working on . . .
> loving
> my body as it is.
> I think I'm happy to have—
> I don't know if *happy* is the right word—
>
> [He chuckles].
>
> I'm *okay* with being in a female body,
> that is perceived as a masculine female body. (2010)

Luke articulates the difficulty of ignoring heteronormative pressures to both define our bodies and to define our gender *through* our bodies. The noise of the binary echoes: "Well if you want this, then you must be that."

Sometimes, the buzzing gets too loud, even from within the trans-community. I have not felt a specific pressure from anyone here, nobody saying, "This is the right way to transition." But a kind of omnipresent pressure seems to exist, which a few of my consultants addressed. Stephen recalled when he was considering taking T, and he started to feel unsure if he would go in that direction:

> I mean, I was scared to death though.
> I mean, I would go back and forth every day
> for whether or not I should be taking hormones.
> And I would talk to people about it.
> And one of the shitty things was like I felt like I couldn't talk to my therapist about it because I felt like if I told her I was thinking I shouldn't take T, then she wouldn't write my letter.

So I was real selective about who I talked to about it.
And the people in the community I knew who were trans, I didn't want to tell them
that I was thinking maybe I didn't want to take T.
Because there's this whole, you know,
"Oh you're trans and you changed your name and congratulations and
when are you starting your T?"
I mean
I think that's sort of . . .the trajectory for the way a lot of people think about it.
(2008)

Tate also spoke about this pressure, in which sometimes it feels as if by medically transitioning, one will be more accepted into the community.

I think what I struggle with the whole top surgery thing
is there is a huge push that if you're trans-identified to fully transition.
And it's by everybody you know—it's like a gravy train, you got to jump on it.
And it's just—nothing against people who have transitioned—
and I don't feel like, it's not a direct pressure,
it's like an indirect, almost subconscious pressure, to be, like,
"Oh, don't you want this?" (2009a)

Tate's description of the pressure to medically transition as "not direct" aligns with the way other consultants also spoke about it. Here is Luke:

I mean
I think that there are ways in which the experiences can be very different; however, I also think that there is a lot of overlap in experience too,
so I feel like . . . "why can't we all just get together and be friends?"

[He breaks into a smile]

But I haven't experienced so much a kind of divide *in the community*
as opposed to, as when it comes to who hangs out, who goes to events or whatever,
but I do feel like there's some *pressure* to transition,
kind of this . . .
I don't know if you call it a hierarchy that's set up, that if you transition . . .
[that] what it means to be complete or done or whatever is to transition.
There's almost this assumption that you haven't figured it out yet,
or you're not done yet,
or you're not brave enough yet to go there,
or whatever, and there's this kind of idealizing of becoming a passable man,
so that's kind of frustrating. (2010)

Luke agrees with Tate about feeling an underlying pressure to medically transition, and also expands this to address how narratives that favor a linear transition, with a clear goal and end point, can be pervasive and dominating, even within the community.

Neeve told me that he felt as much pressure from genderqueer people as he does from fully "passing" trans-men, and wondered if it is not so much a pressure as it is that everyone, inside and outside of the community, wants to offer an opinion. That is, this is not the same as so-called "peer pressuring" your friend to do drugs, as the narrative goes, but rather, feeling pulled in many directions. The fluidity itself, the lack of a single, clearly carved out path, makes this a constant topic for trans people. As people explore and challenge their own decisions, they are also "advising" others—in ways that are helpful, but sometimes also feel overwhelming, or dictate, in an indirect way, a particular path.

> And so I definitely feel pressure from both sides.
> I was saying to a friend the other day, "Everybody's got a opinion on it,"
> you know, and it's pretty crazy because most identity politics
> nobody's going to feel entitled to be like,
> [Changes tone to a commanding voice].
> "Oh, this is what I think you should do."
>
> And so what is it about—
> I guess . . . trans stuff is the most nascent, and . . .
> and gender's just so embedded in every piece of our existence that everyone feels entitled to some opinion.
> But it's crazy . . . I was at a party and this woman was like
>
> [He speaks in a higher voice].
> "I just think the medical stuff is unnecessary."
>
> Just offered that up to me, you know? And I was like,
> "Lady. Like I hear you and we can have a conversation about that," but, "*Really*?" (2010)

Neeve's point that "everyone feels entitled to some opinion" and his anecdote about the party also touches on how easily trans-bodies are regarded as public spaces, which often turn into spectacle. In this case, a non-trans person felt comfortable advising Neeve about

his body; similarly, when Tate was in the hot tub, his non-trans friends felt free to comment on his body: the trans body then, because of its fluidity and hybridity, because it challenges the gender binary or transgresses these "norms," becomes a subject of difference, which people want to explain, exoticize, or justify.

A core understanding of gender in hegemonic society operates on the belief that body determines gender, and that body, as this tangible thing, is something "natural," something that cannot be undone or redefined. The binary system has firmly established male and female bodies as opposite and unwavering. When people transgress gender, often society focuses on the body as a way to challenge this, to uphold this binary. But what is the male body? How do transgender males redefine the male body by claiming their identities? I would argue that transgender males, even those who fully medically transition, who 100% identify as a man, still subvert, challenge, or *expand* the possibilities of the male body. One of the most evident examples of where this new male body claims space and offers possibilities is with sex.

I want it to be seen as a different type of body.
-Luke (2010)

Contrary to popular beliefs, the majority of transgender males do not undergo genital reconstruction surgery—the attached penis, at least for many, is not the crux of their male identity. None of my consultants have undergone this surgery, and only one person expressed a desire for this, but expensive costs, the lack of functionality, and health reasons prevent him from following this route, all reasons that seem to be common. "Maybe in my next life," he said. While my consultants often spoke of desiring a flat chest, none talked about wanting an attached penis. Again, I am not claiming that this view speaks for the majority of trans-males; however, I do believe we must pay attention to the different ways of defining and creating masculinities.

After talking for some time about his chest surgery and T, Stephen spoke candidly about not feeling drawn toward "bottom surgery:"

> But the thing about it is,
> I don't feel the same way about—
> it doesn't feel necessary for me—and maybe this is just now, I don't know—
> but the idea of having any kind of bottom surgery even doesn't—
> that doesn't feel important to me at all.
> And I think that's the case for a lot of transguys.
> And I don't know if that's because it's prohibitively expensive and
> it's not well-perfected and so I don't even think of it as a possibility.
> But I think even if it was a possibility,
> it doesn't feel important to me,
> but having top surgery felt really important to me. (2008)

As Stephen explains, bottom surgery is in many ways less of a reality for trans-males, and so fewer models of this kind of trans-body exist. But also, he stresses, "it doesn't feel important to me." Because the chest is such a visible marker of the female body to outsiders, this also may explain why trans-males feel more drawn to altering their chests than their genitals. Furthermore, the penis can be substituted or replaced, if one wishes, as Neeve playfully explains.

> I've got stubble envy lik*e crazy*. I'm always looking at dudes' stubble, you know . . .
> magazine covers and shit.
>
> [We both laugh].
>
> Penis envy? I can take it or leave it.
> That's fine. I'm totally okay with detachable dicks.
> But I want that stubble.
> Pretty badly sometimes. (2010)

Though my consultants didn't talk much about genital reconstruction surgery, that doesn't mean that they didn't talk about their cocks. Some consultants "pack," some don't. Some only use language that conveys male "parts," while others interchange their words. Still, these conversations about bodies focused less on defining what was male or female, and instead emphasized the construction and performance of gender-identity. One way for my

consultants to consider these aspects, in relation to bodies, was to speak about sex. Sex is a space where the body reaches a pinnacle of being both private and public. When we engage in sex, we invite someone else to closely read our body. During sex my consultants can feel completely in touch with their bodies, or experience discomfort or anxiety. How sexual partners perceive us resonates deeply. Tate, for instance, reflects:

> I'm not female, I'm not a girl.
> And even if—and that said, you know I think it's kind of funny,
> like if I'm having sex or if I'm being intimate with somebody . . .
> . . . I love that I have parts that give me pleasure.
> Does that make me feel any less of a boy?
> Hell no. You know, it's fine, and especially if the person I'm sleeping with,
> still treats me like a boy, and is still able to recognize, past that physicalness.
> In no way
> does it make me feel like I got to run out, and get a shot of T,
> just so that my voice lowers.
> Do I wish I had a lower voice?
> Absolutely.
> Do I need to have one in order to have true happiness?
> No.
> You know, like, fishing gives me true happiness.
>
> [He laughs] (2009a)

Tate addresses questions of medicalization, sex, bodies, and masculinity as interconnected; they are separate parts that contribute to a whole, such as many ingredients in a recipe. How can we speak of one part without speaking of the others? These aspects of our identities do not require separate conversations or categories, Tate suggests, but feed into each other. Tate again returns to this metaphor of visibility and perception—if the person is "able to recognize" him for who he is, then he can be fully present and intimate. Most of my consultants, if they talked about sex, spoke of the importance of perception. For example, Luke stresses the way others' views of him affected his comfort:

> I definitely don't want to be perceived as pretty.
> Or if I'm with a partner, I don't want my partner to look at me
> the same way they would a feminine woman, even if
> we might biologically have the same parts,

I want it to be seen as a different type of body.
And that's really important to me.
And if you don't get that—
    it's hard to explain,
    so it's really important in a partner that they understand that, and if,
you know, if I was with like a more masculine gendered person,
I would probably see that interaction as more . . . gay male interaction,
    whether or not, you know,
whatever bodies we were in. And, there are days
when I want my chest to go away,
and there are days when I like that I have a subtle—
because again—
it's kind of like fucking with gender,
    what it's not supposed to be,
and you know,
I don't know how explicit you want us to be.

[He laughs].

CS: Be as explicit as you want

Like sexually I always like to use a cock.
But like for a long time I was like, "Does that mean
I want to be a guy?" I don't know,

[His voice rises]
"Do I have penis envy?"

But now I'm just like, *whatever*, that's what I enjoy.
So I would like my body to be more . . . I guess more muscular and less hips,
but my friend tells me I can just do that with working out, so.
[He laughs]
I'm working on the working out part, but I don't want to be hairy,
I don't want to be a *guy,*
I just want to be something else, I guess. (2010)

Luke considers the complex relationship between gender identity and the body, and how crucial it is for the sexual partner to understand how these fit together. "It's hard to explain," Luke says. We *know* what our bodies mean, but how do we explain? *Perception* of the body liberates us from the weight of the binary. Luke also addresses experience as crucial to understanding the body ("*Whatever*, that's what I enjoy). For Luke, defining herself in opposition to the binary, "fucking with gender," even with her body, helps Luke to

understand *his* personal gender identity: "I don't want to be a *guy*, I just want to be something else, I guess."

My purpose here is not to make generalizations about how trans-males engage in sex or feel about their bodies, but rather to assert the argument that trans-males create a large, fluid spectrum of sexual experiences and bodies. Some reconstruct their bodies in order to get closer to who they are, whereas others might place more emphasis on the perception of their bodies. Yet none of my consultants are "denying" their bodies; they are not "shedding" the realities of their bodies. Rather, bodies are a place of action and movement; in various and emergent ways, my consultants interact with, challenge, and use their bodies to claim their masculinities. Bodies are what we make of them. The trans-body narrative is complicated, varied, and uncontained. No matter if they identify as men, male, trans, genderqueer, or all of those, my consultants' understandings and expressions of their bodies convey a continuum of possibilities.

June 8, 2001

Walking home from the subway in Harlem. I just got off work, a soul-sucking full-time job. I'm wearing a polo shirt, khakis. A woman stops me on the corner of Frederick Douglass and 116th. She's Latina, 30s. Wearing a halter top, tight jeans, hoop earrings. Papi, papi, *she says.* You got a dollar, papi*? I stop and fish a dollar out of my pocket. Here, you go, I say, smiling. Puzzlement, then she breaks into a smile.* Oh shit, man, I thought you were a guy. *I tell her,* That's cool. *She speaks fast, smiling.* Oh, shit, *she says.* Whoa, you look just like a boy. You look like a boy, till I seen you smile.

August 14, 2006

A hot summer day. I'm walking through Bed-Stuy. Fulton Street bustles with beauty parlors, nail boutiques, and take-out restaurants selling Caribbean food. I turn down Marcus Garvey, and then onto Hancock St, lined with brownstones. I pass a group sitting on a stoop, a couple of teenagers, a few kids. After I pass them, I hear a guy: Yo, hey, yo, man, you got a light? *His tone is aggressive.* Yo! Hey. *I keep moving, thinking he's not talking to me. Then, I stop. He is talking to me, I realize. I turn around. A young black man, wearing a white ribbed sleeveless shirt, is leaning against the railing. He studies me and his face changes into a smile.* Hey, *he says, sweetly, slowly, drawing out his words.* You got a light?

September 20, 2007

The C train is crowded, packed with locals who look tired and tourists with shopping bags. I'm squashed between two people, and this drunk guy, white, late 30s, is standing in front of me, hanging on. He starts singing, Are you a girl or a boy? *I'm staring ahead, like the rest of the locals, eyes half-mast, not engaging. He gets louder and louder, singing the lyrics over and over. He smiles at me, leaning in too close.* You remember that song, remember? *I don't react. He's smiling; his tone is not aggressive. Other people are pretending not to notice.* Man, you are doing it, *he says,* this masculine female thing, this female

looking like a guy, you are totally doing it, its awesome, man, you're totally pulling off. *Doors open, a new crowd swells on, and he disappears from my view. I feel like everyone is looking at me, but I don't feel bad, not exactly. A part of me, inside, is maybe even smiling.*

Chapter 4
Perceptions: How People See You and How They Treat You

Not long ago, while I was visiting friends in Seattle, we hiked through the city park, Discovery Park. As we headed toward the north bluff, walking alongside Douglas-firs and hemlocks under an overcast sky, we passed an ancient-looking cinderblock building with rusty chains looped across the doors. The windows, without glass, were crossed with iron bars, like a jail. Wild vines and weeds webbed across the walls. The sign on one door read "Men;" the other one said "Ladies." The three of us stopped, looked at the building, then at each other.

"Huh. A relic of the old binary system," my friend quipped.

We continued walking.

Most people do not think twice about which door to walk through when they use a public restroom. But for trans-identified males, making the "wrong" choice often causes discomfort or humiliation, or threatens safety. The public bathroom *is* a symbol of the gender binary, prompting questions about how trans-identified males move through the larger public realm. How do outsider interactions challenge our identities, and how do we claim our trans-identities in a society that operates on binaries? I open this chapter with a focus on public bathrooms; I will also explore issues of presentation, outsider "mis-readings," and recognition. Unlike those that came before it, this chapter focuses more heavily on the narratives of my consultants who are not perceived consistently as male; my aim is not to *exclude* the narratives of the others, but rather to convey the diversity of trans-male individuals and their relationships to the public sphere.

Our bodies bear the weight of us moving through the world. As we come into our personal trans-identities, sometimes the body documents us figuring out *who we are*. But the material body only represents a part of it. How we dress, how we look, how we speak accompany us as we move through the public sphere every day, engaging with strangers, friends, families, and lovers; their perceptions affirm, challenge, or attempt to ignore our gender identities. How do we create emergent spaces of trans-masculinities when we live in a society that does not invite these possibilities?

I should be able to fucking use the bathroom in peace
--Luke (2010)

In several interviews, my consultants brought up bathrooms as examples of public spaces where they felt uncomfortable. Consequently, I began asking all of my consultants about their public bathroom experiences, an everyday occurrence that most of the population never thinks about. The majority of my consultants who are not medically transitioning agreed that they try to avoid using public bathrooms as much as possible, or at least wait until the place is deserted. Wait. Watch. Look to see if anyone has gone in, or wait for them to come out. Go in quickly. Don't look at anyone. Leave quickly.

"I really try to avoid *people* being in the bathroom," Ryan said. "I try to just avoid going to the bathrooms if I can. When it's unavoidable, then yeah—I mean probably 80%, 70%, I go to male bathrooms" (2009). Mo didn't use the men's bathroom until after he had top surgery: "I basically wouldn't go to the bathroom" (2009). But he also figured out where all the unmarked or unisex bathrooms were in Chapel Hill and Carrboro, safe spaces. Even now, although he is read consistently as male, he sometimes still feels "anxious about using bathrooms." Luke said, "I try to avoid them." Luke looked at me, smiled. Then, continued:

> And usually if it's a public place with a multi–user bathroom,
> I'll use the women's bathroom, but I kind of try to wait,
> until . . . there's not many people around, or if I go in,

I try to walk very quickly to the stall.
Or I will literally stick out my chest to make it clear I'm a woman,
because I just don't want to deal with shit.

CS: Do you ever use the men's?

I use the men's bathroom if it's a single user bathroom.
I do that fairly frequently.
I—unless it's a queer space—I haven't used a men's bathroom with other men in there.
Because, I don't know, sometimes I feel like it would be easier, because people probably wouldn't notice me as much,
based on the way people behave in men's bathroom[s],
but it also feels a little . . .
scarier.

CS: Yeah, that's sort of how I think.
Although a lot of friends tell me it's actually,
is easier, because men don't really pay attention as much.

And it wouldn't cause—it wouldn't cause as much drama,
it seems like, because, you know,
I've been told by security guards to get out of the bathroom.
Or in rest areas, rural places,
. . . I've had men follow me into the women's bathroom thinking I was a guy,
so then there's that drama around like, "What do you do, what do you say?"
[He laughs].
Like do you tell them, "Actually, no"?
It's just complicated, so sometimes I just feel like it would be easier to use the men's.

CS: You mean they see you go in, and then they just go in, like,
they don't look at the sign?

Yeah, exactly.
Or I've had women kind of come in and then think it was a men's bathroom,
think they went into the wrong bathroom,
so they'll go out and look at the sign on the door and they're really confused.
But then there's the part of me that feels like,
"You know what?
I should be able to fucking use the bathroom in peace
and not worry about it so much."
And sometimes I have people, mostly straight people, who will be like,
"You should just go in there and be like, 'Fuck it to all you,'"
but I feel like that's a lot easier said than done, you know,
sometimes you just don't want to deal with it.
But I don't know,
maybe I'll try using the men's bathroom soon. (2010)

Luke's mixed emotions of nervousness and indignation characterized the way most of my consultants spoke about their public bathrooms experiences. Trans-males want to be able to go into a public bathroom without being challenged, without feeling forced to explain or deny their gender. For the most part, the most troubling bathroom experiences that my consultants shared with me usually involved going into the women's bathroom.

This was certainly the case with Chase. Before he began to medically transition, living as a butch female, Chase constantly worried about using the bathroom.

> But the worst thing was when I moved up here and the older I've gotten—
> I go into a women's bathroom and I feel the same way I did wearing a dress, okay.
> I get the knots in my stomach, and like *fear*.
> Because I know women are going to look at me.
> And I mean, I've had three ladies in Tennessee one time, three older ladies, *scream* when I walked in the bathroom. Literally screamed.
> Like a rapist was walking in.
> And you know, I had to carry on a conversation saying, 'I'm a girl, not a guy,'
> and they calmed down, but they still weren't happy with it.
>
> And then one time I was in the movie theater,
> and I went into the women's bathroom, and a woman that worked at the movie theater followed me into the bathroom, and in front of God and everybody, she said, "If you don't get out of here, I'm going to call the police," she said, "you're in the wrong bathroom."
> And I'm sitting there, like, "You want to come and see?" You know?
> Oh, she wouldn't have none of it.
> She kept saying, "You need to get out of there."
> I thought she was going to—you know, like the crime scene tape?
> I thought she was going to tape off the bathroom and evacuate everybody, and call in two of her big guys to come and drag me out of the bathroom.
> It was terrible.
> And I was . . . fucking sick of it, you know.
> So sometimes I would go in the men's bathroom, even as—
>
> CS: Before you transitioned?
>
> Yeah. And guys don't really pay much attention.
>
> CS: I always get nervous.
>
> I worry a little bit. Because I don't stand to pee.
> But I figured if anybody said anything I'd say something like,

"Why stand when you can sit?" [He laughs]

You know, something like that, and they would probably just blow it off.
But guys don't pay that much attention.
But women are terrible, and they do, they act like you're—
and so I'd get to the point where I'd get someone that looked feminine,
any time I was out with some friends, I would make them go in the bathroom
with me, because they validated me.
It's like if you're with someone that looks like a woman,
you know, then that must be a woman.
You know? It's okay, you're safe.
You know, the other women will think they're safe.
But if you go in by yourself,
you're a rapist,
or I don't know.
It's just terrible. It's humiliating. (2009)

Most of my consultants had a bathroom horror story, but Chase in particular spent time telling me these stories, his voice filled with emotion. He looked at me intently, and I could see him remembering, almost as if he were there again. His narrative raises questions about negotiating public spaces as a person who does not "fit" into the gender binary, and how these spaces constrict one's identity, forcing one to "explain" one's gender, or even to claim a gender that does not feel right.

The public bathroom not only dictates that one fit into the gender binary, but also challenges the diversity of masculinities. Masculine women, feminine men, and any gender non-conforming individual often must fight to claim space or give it up entirely; as Chase says, it feels "terrible" to be questioned about one's gender and to have to justify one's right to use the bathroom. Chase also describes the anxiety that emerges from stepping into this space—the anxiety of the transgender person who suddenly feels as if he is violating some social pact, and the anxiety of the others, who feel threatened or unnerved by this "transgression." In order to enter this space without causing alarm, Chase needed "feminine" looking women to accompany him; they "validated" his right to enter such space, and buffered outsider responses.

The public bathroom often incites fear or anxiety; consequently, many of the stories I heard conveyed pain or vulnerability. Yet consultants frequently also narrated their "bathroom stories" with humor and light-heartedness. Neeve, in particular, thinks it's important to see the humor in the situation.

> If I know that I'm getting read as male,
> then obviously I'm going to go in the male bathroom.
>
> CS: But like when you're in like Chapel Hill or Carrboro,
> like bars—
>
> Oh, well.
> I think women's bathrooms smell better,
> like *a lot* better.
>
> CS [laughing]: Yeah, guys' bathrooms are nasty—
>
> They're totally nasty.
> And so if I'm in a place where people aren't going to be like—
> Or [they'll] do a double-take but then be, like, "Okay, whatever, you know where you are," then I'll probably just go into the women's room.
> Because I don't really need to—I don't know—just energetically I'm just like, whatever. Basically I walk in as an outsider.
> I walk in with my head down,
> and I don't want to make eye contact and
> I don't want to freak anybody out, and
> then I don't usually stop to wash my hands.
> I just like out of there as soon as possible, you know, and I do that in the men's room too, so you know, either way.
> It just comes down to odor, sometimes.
>
> [We both laugh]. (2010)

The majority of my consultants would probably agree with Neeve, that one enters the public bathroom as an "outsider," whether one enters through the "men" or "women's" door. Furthermore, trans-identified males might also feel that they occupy this "outsider" status within the larger public sphere, making choices and figuring out the best ways of negotiating their identities in a space that often feels impenetrable.

My consultants were divided on which public bathroom they used more often, although everyone seemed to agree that using the women's bathroom caused more of an uproar, while using the men's bathroom made them nervous. Neeve maybe put it best when he said, "Do I not want to freak out that group of old ladies, or do I not want to go into the same place as that big sketchy looking dude?" (2010). Sometimes, although going into the women's bathroom feels safer, this decision also feels *wrong* for some of my consultants, a denial of their identity.

Regardless of which door one chooses, the public bathroom often demands the performance of gender and *thinking about* this performance, as Neeve expresses:

> Right. I guess if I'm going into a women's room,
> I shrink back, like, "Don't worry about me, like it's fine."
> [He speaks in a high, soft voice]
> "I'm just coming in, I know it's weird, but it's cool."
>
> But in a men's room,
> I have to sort of build up my energy and be like,
> [He lowers his pitch]
> "Fuck yeah, I'm here man, what the fuck do you gotta say about it?"
> You know, and just sort of . . . walk in.
> And so I guess I can build up that energy, but in some ways I prefer to shrink,
> you know. It's a lot. And I mean that's the biggest trans-conundrum, right?
> I mean, typically, honestly, if there's a place for me to go outside, I'll just go outside.
>
> CS: Yeah, I've done that here. At the Reservoir [a bar]. (2010)

Using public bathrooms for genderqueer and trans-identified males is often just tiring, which is one reason people try to avoid them. Or, as Neeve says, sometimes we "shrink" in order to negotiate space. This is not a denial of ourselves . . . not exactly. But by making ourselves less visible, we may temporarily quell the challenges.

Queer spaces open up other possibilities for transgender people. Public bathrooms in gay bars, even if they also only offer two choices, tend to at least feel safer, if not more comfortable. On several occasions at queer dances at the Pinhook, Tate and I have gone into

the men's bathroom together. It's a safe, if slightly uncomfortable space. The gay men don't know what to think of us, but Tate chats with them and acts absolutely like he belongs there. The set-up, however, is challenging. Only one stall actually has a door, and in that stall are a toilet and a urinal; so men leave the door swung open. Tate and I often stand there for several minutes, waiting. Once, while I went in the stall and closed the door behind me, a line grew outside, with Tate stuck there, waiting. "Carter, you're killing me out here," he said, laughing. But Tate is also matter-of-fact: "We're boys. Why wouldn't we use this bathroom?"

Often at queer events or trans conferences, participants "take over" the public bathrooms, hiding the "Men" and "Women" signs with sheets of paper that read "Gender Neutral Bathroom," in a sense, desegregating and reclaiming public space. When you enter this redefined bathroom, you may encounter drag queens, trans-males, trans-females, genderqueers, non-trans females, non-trans males, and gender non-conforming people all in the same space. Nobody will question you, and the feeling of belonging, of being welcomed *into* this public space, calms any lingering anxieties: here you can be comfortable, you can be yourself.

Sometimes it would be "Sir," and then . . . "I'm sorry, Ma'am"
-Chase (2009)

The public bathroom is one of the most basic ways that trans-identified males may encounter, negotiate, and possibly re-claim a space that challenges their gender identities, but it is also only one example on a continuum of everyday experiences. As we carve out these masculinities for ourselves, we move under the constant gaze of strangers, and how we negotiate that movement differs depending on context, mood, and comfort level. Self-presentation differs among my consultants. Some feel comfortable expressing a genderqueer presentation, while others feel more comfortable being consistently perceived as male. The word "passing" is often used to express transpeople's experiences in regard to their

presentation and the gaze, including by transpeople themselves, and appears in dialogue in this thesis. However, I find the phrase "passing as men" problematic, as it reinforces the notion that non-trans males are "real" and trans-males are some how inauthentic, and that trans-males are *trying to be like* males, instead of just being themselves—which happens to be, for most of my consultants, male-identified.[8] All of my consultants, regardless of their identity or presentation, want to walk through the world as themselves and to be recognized for who they are.

My consultants who are not read 100% of the time as male vary in their attachments to being perceived as male and to the concept of fluidity, as well as in their responses to others' perceptions. I asked Ryan how often he thinks he's read as male or female by strangers, and how readings fit with his own perception of himself.

> I think it's probably like 50/50.
> Yeah it's funny because sometimes I get read as female or get called "she"
> or "lady" or whatever; it's just like, "Whatever, it doesn't really matter."
> I mean, sometimes I'm just not all that attached to being perceived as male,
> but then other times,
> for a different reason, it makes me so pissed off.
> Like I was at this party last weekend—
> and also it depends on what I'm wearing,
> what kind of effort I'm putting into . . . being a male persona,
> or putting off a male performance.
> So I was at this costume party.
> Not [costume], but—well, anyway, I was dressed up in what I thought was a
> male-ish outfit, and that sounds silly, but I was wearing a tie, you know, had my
> male persona thing going on, and as soon as we got there, this lady—
> this lady I didn't know—
> the first thing, she was, like,
> "*Hey ladies*,"
> and it just threw me off for the whole night.
>
> CS: "Ladies" is the worst.
> Especially when you're feeling good—
>
> Yeah, you feel like your hair's looking good,

[8] Halberstam speaks to the problems with the narrative of "passing: "Passing as a narrative assumes that there is a self that masquerades as another kind of self and does so successfully" (1998: 21).

you look in the mirror and you're—
Yeah. That sucks. (2009)

For many of my consultants, particular words, especially "lady" or "ma'am," seem to pierce more deeply than female pronouns, though these also might cause one to bristle. "Lady" is loaded with meanings to which none of my consultants feel connected, and they do not want others to perceive them in this light. When a person addresses them as "lady" or "ma'am," this person is not seeing them at all. The words are especially difficult to hear if you have spent time in front of the mirror, as Ryan explains, preparing yourself to enter a space in which you want others to recognize the gender you see in your reflection.

For many of my consultants, that kind of preparation turns into a daily ritual. The gender performance begins as soon as we get ready to leave the house, as we check our appearances, our presentations. But all people perform gender, and here, in a sense, the word "performance" undercuts the full *meaning* of the experience. My consultants, in this space of examining their reflections and preparing for the outside world, are not necessarily trying to *look like a man*, but rather are bringing forth their gender identities that they have *come into* for the public. Tate explained:

Yeah, I think about that every time I wake up in the morning.
Well, I think about it when I put on my clothes.
Like I put on my little binding bra,
and I put on a cute shirt.
And some shirts, you know—if I'm wearing
just a T-shirt that's going to be more revealing of my chest,
then *I have* to be in a good place that day when I wake up.
So I think that about a lot,
    just in that "get dressed in the morning" kind of way,
    "interacting with people" kind of way.
But as far as outside of—
usually what I do is I go to the mirror,
and I say, "Oh God, you're so cute today"—you know what I mean?
[He chuckles]
Like I have that cocky, happy, "I'm such a boy,
oh, I'm such a cute boy," especially after Molly cut my hair.
[Smiling, he takes off his ball cap and shows me his new haircut] (2010d)

The affirmation "I'm such a boy" invokes both the claiming *and* performing of one's gender identity: Tate is assuring himself of his identity, and preparing himself to step away from the mirror and into public space. This ritual of reflection and recognition symbolizes the dual *coming into* and *coming out* experiences of trans-identities. But Tate also assured me that *his* focus on presentation and *his* understanding of his masculinity does not represent that of others:

> Because . . . my male identity is based a lot on the way I present myself
> and that's *really* important to me, that I—
> it's like I wear a certain kind of clothes, I have a certain kind of mannerism,
> I talk a certain kind of way, but that's how—
> those are the pieces that *I* put together to fit with my gender,
> those are not the pieces that somebody else puts together. (2010d)

Tate also emphasized that even with his security and confidence in his gender identity, he too still grapples with strangers' (mis)perceptions of him. He challenged me on the way he felt that I was misrepresenting him.

> Like, you see me. You see me and think,
> "You must be really confident, you walk through this world really confidently,
> you've been doing this longer than me."
> But it's still not true, I—
> if I think about what I have to wear, if I have to dress up in the straight world,
> you know, that makes me uncomfortable.
> And if I'm going to get "ma'amed" and "ladyied,"
> and my birth name is going to be used in particular situations,
> you know.
> There's all these things. (2010d)

Tate reiterated for me what many of my consultants expressed, that everyone felt, at some point, misread. Sometimes these misreadings roll off of us; other times, as Ryan said, we are "thrown off" for the night, or, in the worst cases, we internalize the person's perception of us and wonder what we are doing wrong.

While my consultants move through the world—and experience and engage with others' perceptions of them—differently, all of them seem to share a similar sort of insight into and awareness of the public gaze. As Tate articulates:

> Certainly being transgender has an effect that changes my perspective on the world
> because, you know,
> I'm one of those people who believes that gender affects
> all your—*all the time*—your interactions with other people,
> and how people see you and how they treat you.
> And it's not dissimilar to the feminist argument about how men see women
> and how they treat you based on, if you're a woman.
> Well the same thing is true for being genderqueer.
> They see you,
> they make assumptions,
> they treat you a certain way,
> they have a reaction,
> they like you,
> they don't like you,
> based on that. And so that affects how I interact with people.
> So every time I go in a restaurant and I get called "lady"—
> well, for a lady, that would be fine, that's great, that doesn't affect them at all—
> but it totally affects—
> *I* have an emotional reaction to that. (2010d)

Tate describes gender as pervasive and all-encompassing, influencing all of our "interactions with other people," and "how people see you and how they treat you" on a daily basis. He stresses that while he must constantly negotiate others' perspective of his gender identity, he also credits his gender identity for giving him a different "perspective on the world"; his position gives him a critical stance, which makes him aware of the power of others' gaze and frames his own seeing.

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"However it goes, it goes": an interlude with Neeve

Most of my genderqueer consultants agreed that the majority of the time, they have no idea how a person will "read" them. When Neeve came over to my house, we spent a

long time talking about outsider perceptions, and how those shift depending on circumstance, physical cues, and place.

> It's interesting to me how identity shifts,
> in regards to location, right.
> And so when I'm driving from Milwaukee down here,
> when I'm in the Midwest, there's totally a place for me
> being a butch woman . . . a farm wife.
>
> [We laugh]
>
> And then I know once I hit Kentucky,
> then it's going to turn into . . . the bathroom question.
> You know: "What's going to happen at the rest stop?" (2010)

Neeve's observation about the way place may influence gender performance astutely conveys the fluidity of gender, while subverting the idea of gender as natural. In one environment a person reads as a "farm wife"; somewhere else, this person reads as a guy, as a lesbian, or as unknown. Gender performance may shift in these different places because cultural *perception* dictates this shift. "There's totally a place for me . . . [as] a farm wife," Neeve explains, but this is a temporary place, a place constructed by the gaze of the outsider, a place where he may take refuge, but does not feel comfortable inhabiting for long. These shifts in readings also prompt questions about the way that American society defines masculinity, a theme that winds throughout our conversation. When the masculinities we create fall "outside" the boundaries of traditional masculinity, how does outsider perception shift?

Neeve's friends perceive him as male; often strangers read him as male as well. At work most people use female pronouns with him, and at this point, he feels that this is comfortable. For the past few years Neeve has been a Research Associate working in HIV prevention with incarcerated women and STI prevention with HIV positive women. With some of his consultants, he feels he's built a deep trust, and a part of that connects to his genderqueer identity. But he also explained that even in his job, perception differs.

> And there have been times when I've gone through an entire interview with them
> and they will be talking to their friend,
> [He mimics talking on a cell phone]
> And will be like, "Yeah, his computer's not working."
> And then I'm like, "What does this mean for my job?"
> Some people are going to be walking around, like,
> "Oh, that dude who interviewed me, he's totally cool,"
> and then other people are going to be like, "Oh, that girl was so sweet."
>
> [He laughs].
>
> And I guess that's just coming to peace:
> I'm fucking with people and that's how it is.
> Anyway. Yeah, the context, right. So much of it is about context.
> And it's a really amazing thing to have the insight into, but it's also . . . a completely confounding thing that can suck all of your time and energy.
> Because it's like, "Okay, what is it about this circumstance,
> what is the exact nuance?" (2010)

Being read as female or male, depending on the situation, offers an opportunity that most people don't have—to be privy to both female and male "insiderness." In this way, a genderqueer identity empowers a person with a kind of unique access, or, as Neeve says, the specific "context" of the situation gives one a new "insight." But, as he also said, this shifting or in-between space also becomes "confounding" and exhausting, to never know exactly how people perceive you.

> It's interesting the way it varies with the cues, right?
> I came back from India and let my hair grow for . . . four months,
> and was getting called "she" a lot more. Which is also interesting.
> Like in some ways, it's nice to take a vacation from it every once in a while.
> Because in some ways if I'm in public and I'm getting called "she" all the time, then it's cool because I don't have to worry about my voice, you know,
> I don't have to think about the ways I'm coming across that should enable people to continue reading me as a dude—I can just sort of let that go, for a second, you know?
> But it doesn't feel like that's who I *am*; it's more just like a vacation.
> But then I'll go to the barber, and I'll be [think], "Okay, here we go, we're back in it."
> And then I'm read as male, probably 80% of the time.
> It's also about weight—if I lose 5 or 10 pounds, then, I'll be perceived as female, whereas if I'm bulking up a little bit more . . . (2010)

Perception of masculinity relies heavily on particular cues. Short hair versus long hair. Weight. Clothing. Voice. Facial hair. Body language. These physical cues also prescribe a particular kind of constructed masculinity. My consultants express a range of masculinities; those who identify as genderqueer in a sense shatter traditional perceptions of masculinity, even if they present as a "typical" male. Neeve's articulation of being read as "female" as a "vacation" expresses a personal feeling with which other my consultants would not necessarily agree. But I believe that all of my consultants can relate to this feeling of relief—moments in which they take a break from thinking about gender.

Neeve expanded on his recent trip to the barber. He had just returned from India, his hair was getting longer, and he was being read more often as "female." He walked into a local barbershop in Pittsboro, and the barber looked at him and said:

> "Boy, you're *shaggy*."
>
> And so I sat down and I was in there for a good half an hour with those men, that's probably the longest time I've occupied a space as a man talking to other men, and it was a little bit scary.
> I mean, for Pittsboro, North Carolina,
> it was a little bit scary.
> I mean they were saying racist, homophobic shit, and I was just,
> "Wow, I don't know—"
> and then so are there times for me where I'm, like,
> I don't *know* if I want to commit to inhabiting this space.
> I don't know if I want that.
> Yeah, they were talking about how someone went into this nursing home and killed seven people and so one of the people killed was a male nursing attendant, and one guy was like, "Yeah it was a *shame* that everybody died—
> except for that male nurse."
> I was like, "*What*?"
> But I felt like the only thing I could do within that space was to sort of . . . groan, "Ohhh," and sort of not respond to it and let there be an awkward moment or something. If I were fully transitioned and felt secure in that space—
> [but] I didn't want to be revealed as female, you know.
> So I think I might have been able to call them out a little more
> if I'd felt secure in my identity in that . . .
> So then he cuts my hair, shaves it off, you know, the whole barber cut, and *then* I'm at the gas station, the light goes off, I'm lifting up the hood.
> And so this was when my hair had gotten a little bit long, when I was more in

girl hair territory, but *now* the hair had come off.
And I lifted up the hood and this gorgeous country boy
pulls up in his pickup truck and comes up to me, and is like,
"Y'all right, buddy?"
And starts talking to me about what is going on with the car. (2010)

Neeve's narrative conveys the tension that may often arise in daily experiences for genderqueer individuals, in which you reveal to outsiders the identity you have *come into*, but then do not know for sure how they perceive you. Many of my consultants experience a complicated tension, a mix of wanting to be read as male but also not feeling entirely 100% comfortable in that space. Neeve's story with the barber also conveys a specific reason that he did not feel comfortable: he felt nervous that he would be *found out* in a potentially threatening situation. The men's homophobic remarks then created a context of vulnerability, in which he did not want to be "found out," but *also* in which he thought, "I don't *know* if I want to commit to inhabiting this space." *This space* is not "maleness," but rather a very specific homophobic male space. Without these men's particular remarks, Neeve may have felt less threatened, though perhaps slightly uncomfortable or nervous. Threat, then, as the bathroom stories also highlight, is often a part of this kind of tension—in which being perceived as male feels *right*, and yet these interactions may also evoke this feeling of not quite *belonging,* or, *not wanting* to belong.

The recorded discussion with Neeve went on for two hours, and if I had to choose a dominant theme from Neeve's narrative, it would be that of fluidity, which informs not only his gender, but also his general outlook on life. Neeve speaks in a winding yet focused way, moving quickly from one thought to the next. His talk, though, does not stray into tangents; rather, it elaborates on each thought, which then ripples outward, the way water moves in rings when a stone drops in a still pool.

Neeve thinks deeply about how he moves in the world, and how others receive his movements. Instead of seeing his genderqueer identity as a *problem,* he spoke of the way it guides him through the world, allowing him to interact with people in a different way, and creating a kind of tension that leads to a new, exciting place.

> And I guess, you know,
> there's something fun about—
> about really not knowing.
> There are times when I can walk away from an interaction
> and just really not know how that person was reading me.
> And in some ways that's the ideal. Right?
> Because the exchange we had was based on our personalities and our words and information and those things sort of matter to me, you know.
> Or an exchange of stories, just good spiritedness, kindness . . .
> So all of those sort of . . . base human elements are what appeal to me and are what I want to explore.
> So in some ways I'm okay with . . . not thinking about myself too much—

Here Neeve emphasizes the "fun" in what Luke would describe as "fucking with gender," or, in Tate's words, in "push[ing] those boundaries." Indeed, several of my consultants have suggested that they find satisfaction or "fun" in undercutting expectations and subverting the gender binary—in causing people to pause, or to reconsider their assumptions.

> But it's also—as I was saying—if I'm studying people, though, part of what I'm studying is the way I'm—is the ways that I'm weirding somebody out.
> Like this person is having a hard time looking me in the eye.
> Or the thing that I find most annoying
> is that people don't really hear your questions, you know,
> when it gets in the way of communication.
> That's annoying. Like there will be times—I'll walk into a gas station and I need directions and I'll ask for [them], and just because they can't get past their anxiety about what's going on with me,
> they'll give me wrong directions or something like that.
> Or, you know, if I'm . . . going into a Subway or a burrito shop or I'm telling people what I want on it, you know, and they're unable to actually *hear* me, you know.
> "Actually I said lettuce."
>
> [We both laugh].
>
> That's when I'm sort of—that's when I'm sort of,

"Oh if I could just have it one way or the other and not be flipping people out,
it would be easier to just navigate in a pretty simple way." (2010)

Neeve speaks in a light-hearted tone, and both of us laugh in shared understanding. But what he says carries weight. Not knowing others' perception creates a dichotomy for Neeve, as both "fun" and "annoying": being "one way or the other" may offer him a kind of relief. By engaging with others in everyday experiences, Neeve feels that his genderqueer identity creates this strange or uncomfortable space for people to enter—and he may experience simultaneous satisfaction and annoyance. Neeve doesn't only regard his own movements, but also examines the people who are examining him; *his perception* of *their perception of him* creates this space of possibilities.

When I asked him how he felt about getting read as male or female by strangers, he explained:

I think at this point I'm pretty at peace:
however it goes, it goes.

Because I feel like if people call me "he,"
they're not totally getting the story,
and if people call me "she,"
they're not totally getting the story, right.

So I'm just sort of at peace with,
"Either which way, you're not going to know the complete story of who I am."
And I guess I feel like when people are calling me "she,"
I feel like they're *further removed* from their understanding of my story, you know,
but I'm not at a place where it feels problematic to me, you know.
So, yeah, I guess
I just roll with it.

And sometimes, you know, if it's a place that I'm frequenting,
like the bank or gas station . . .[places] around my house,
the first few times that I've come in they've read me as male,
and then we get to talking, and then, you know . . .
I feel like I can drop my voice [Lowers his voice as he speaks]
I feel like I can talk in a way that it can work itself out,
and people can understand and can be, like,
"Okay, this is a dude with a high voice, but it's still a dude."
But then there are times where I just want to express myself

[His voice goes up]
and have some variation in my intonation,
and so then I'll just let it go and talk how I talk—

[He broke here to tell me about being in India, where he often had the opposite experience, being read as female when he was trying to read as male, or the other way around. Then he returned to discussing his interactions with clerks at local businesses in North Carolina.]

But in some ways with those people it totally works.
Like, I've introduced myself to them as a man . . . and
then they've come to understand, [He softens voice]
"Oh, you've got female parts,"

And so in some ways they still treat me like a dude
but just . . . a *different* dude.
And in some ways those are the most comfortable spaces,
but those are spaces that are so incredibly bizarre.
I mean we're talking about folks in small-town North Carolina,
you know, who—who basically just have those scripts . . .
"I'm talking to a man" or "I'm talking to a woman," right?
And so it's still right for them to [think],
"All right, it makes more sense for me to talk to you as a man."
And then—and so then we just kind of roll with it. (2010)

For the most part, Neeve has reached a kind of "peace" in his understanding of his gender-identity. He has spent years watching how people watch him. Pronouns don't seem to bother Neeve much because, in a sense, they're just words. What moves him is the actual interaction with another person. Neeve embraces his fluidity, shifting his physical cues from male to female, as he creates this space of possibility; but he also invites others *into* this space. His story about speaking to local store clerks, in which they first read him as a man, then realize he is biologically female and so readjust their perception, illustrates the way his gender identity clashes with the binary, and how together, he and these other persons create a space of possibility. These strangers ripple through his experiences as genderqueer. Neeve bridges not only male and female, but also the gender binary with genderqueer, constructing a "*different* dude."

Later, toward the end of the interview, Neeve returned to the experience of not knowing, of moving through space as this genderqueer person, and relayed the humor of this experience. Both of us are laughing.

> I mean there are sometimes when I'm walking through
> and I'm just
> [Changes his voice to sound like a sportscaster]
> "I don't know what I am people! And you don't know what I am
> and I don't know how you're going to read me."
> And I'm just coming at it like, "This is who I am." (2010)

His word choices strike me here. He is "walking through" a space that operates on a gender binary, but his existence also ruptures this space. He doesn't know how people will read him, but he comes toward them at full tilt: "this is who I am. " Not only must he engage in this space, but others must engage with him; in the best moments, they "see" him, and perhaps re-evaluate or revise their notions of gender and masculinity.

***

and not be in this limbo kind of area
-Ryan (2009)

One of the issues that Neeve raised in his conversation came up in several discussions: to move into a space that defines us as "one way or the other," a question that many of us who are not consistently read as male may ask ourselves. These conversations sometimes returned us to the topic of testosterone as helping one to realize a more definite gender identity. In these conversations, consultants pointed to particular moments in which they felt that being able to identify as a more defined gender would have eased tensions or allowed them to feel more comfortable.

Ryan, for instance, identifies as genderqueer and trans-male; nonetheless, as he explained earlier, he also does not always feel particularly attached to being perceived as male. He explained that he feels that strangers read him as 50/50 between male and female.

Friends, community, and co-workers use male pronouns and perceive him as male. But he shared a story with me in which he realized that a couple of guys weren't actually seeing him the way he assumed. One day, a co-worker told him how two of this co-worker's friends, who were loosely associated with the organization and were acquainted with Ryan, perceived Ryan.

> Basically he was telling me that his two friends . . . say this messed up shit
> about me all the time, related to my gender, call me "it" and stuff like that.
> And that was just a big blow.
> I mean, I just don't, I mean—I'm sure people think that about me,
> it's not a total shock. But when someone's, like,
> "Hey this person you've been interacting with tons of time and totally felt like a
> normal reaction, and they behind your back refer to you as *It*,"
> and that information is put out in front of you,
> I don't know.
> It's hard.
> And then those kind of things make me think, "Well, if I was on T,
> then in those situations I would at least get read as male,
> and not be in this limbo kind of area."
> But then I think, "That's dumb, right?
> Who cares what stupid people think?"
> Those guys are obviously—
> they've got some issues going on themselves;
> I mean they're not even my friends. (2009)

Ryan smiled as he talked, shrugging off the experience, but I also saw the hurt in his expression. I additionally *felt* a jolt of the shock that he must have experienced, being privy to others' negative and dehumanizing perception of him. My consultants live most of their lives without experiencing great angst in relation to their gender, moving through a world that may not understand them but where they also do not feel particularly threatened, at least not here in the Triangle. But occasionally those spaces rupture, and you realize just what it is that you're doing, how radical this is, and how threatening this may feel to the hegemony. This experience led Ryan to thinking again about the advantages of T, to consider leaving behind "this limbo kind of area."

He returned to this again when I asked him if he experienced any kind of struggles in understanding his trans-identity:

> I mean, I think the biggest struggle—
> I mean, at this point, the struggle is what to do,
> to do T or not.
> I mean, in terms of internal struggle, not really.
> I mean, I don't know . . .
> every now and again, just running into, people
> who are really homophobic or transphobic or whatever they are,
> like that incident that just happened, where it's just—
> I mean, I think that I live in this little bubble where I mostly see people
> like my friends, that are cool or you assume to be cool.
> And when you are up against—or that's not the case all the way
> around, then yeah,
> that's hard now and then. (2009)

Ryan is representative of all my consultants in that he personally does not feel conflicted about his gender identity. But sometimes outsiders' perceptions create conflict, as Neeve also discussed. Ryan struggles with the question of T, which predominately is a part of his *coming into* his identity; this also, however, connects to how others *perceive* him. Several of my consultants who are not on testosterone regard it as a way not only to alter their bodies, but also to alter others' perception.

Most of the time, the majority of my consultants feel that others' "misread" them if they perceive them as female, pointing out the problems with "lady" or "ma'am." But a few consultants also addressed that they would feel misread if they were constantly perceived as a man. Luke and I talked about what it would feel like to be read 100% of the time as a man. I brought up this topic, sharing with him my own concerns about sometimes wanting the effects of T, but also feeling conflicted about moving through the world as a "man." Luke expanded on this by describing how his gender identity feels both personal and political.

> I want to put out there first before I talk about this
> that anybody who's on T,
> I totally support them.
> And think that my experience—I can't speak for anyone else—

my experience is purely
my experience.
. . . So I want to make that clear.

But I personally feel that if I were to go on T and to pass as a white male,
as you said, the whole time, that would just—
one, it would fuck with my head so much.
Like I just couldn't.
Because if I were to walk down the street and everybody were to see me as a man and not think twice about it, that would be just as bad as everyone seeing me as a normal woman, whatever that is, and not think twice about it, except worse.
Because at least when people see me as a woman,
at least that *is* some part of my experience, like some part of my experience has been being raised as a woman and seeing the world through that lens and knowing what that's like.
But being a man and having that privilege—
I just, I can't comprehend that, like you said.

But also, in addition to personally, I feel like as far as my work for queer liberation . . . I feel like I can be more effective—
I feel like there's a role for people who can serve as allies,
or who can serve as kind of blending in more and speak from that experience.
There's also a role for people who have transitioned and pass as men who can speak from that experience.
But for me personally, I feel like it's *really* important to have people who don't fit, and don't look like a stereotypical man or stereotypical woman, and who don't pass as just one or the other.
And I feel like by leaving that identity, I would be kind of saying,
I would be kind of giving into this binary requirement,
and I would be saying that in order to fulfill my gender identity
I need to look a certain way, and I just don't think that's true.
I think that it's challenging, to kind of counter those ideas.
Those ideas do seep into my head,
and I hate it when[they do] because I feel like,
"Why can't my body be masculine, why can't my body be perceived however I want it to be perceived, you know?"
And just because I have a chest or whatever,
doesn't mean anything about my gender identity.

I feel like that I would also be leaving behind a lot of people . . . I have a great capacity now to serve as a role model
for people who don't feel like they fit into any box,
and so I feel like I need to use that . . . (2010)

For Luke, being perceived as a "man" brings up many questions about privilege, perception, and politics. A genderqueer identity not only *feels* right to Luke, but also works as a powerful

tool for queer liberation. Luke returns to the space of the body as a way to challenge the gender binary, while also expressing how difficult it is to fight such a deeply entrenched narrative. Luke tries to push out those thoughts, that body must "fit" gender, by asserting her genderqueer identity. In claiming his body, Luke addresses important questions of perception and power: "why can't my body be perceived however I want it to be perceived?" Here, Luke reclaims outsider perception, shifting the power of the gaze: if Luke perceives his body this way, then why shouldn't others see Luke in this way? This is not to say that Luke has not thought about changing her body, but at this point, Luke feels comfortable being read as both male and female. Many of my other consultants feel uncomfortable with the female aspect, yet also do not perpetuate a traditional gender binary.

Although Neeve feels at peace with his gender fluidity and in the ways that others perceive him, he is also drawn toward embodying a more defined male gender. Neeve feels fairly confident that he will at some point go on T. I asked Neeve to expand on his reasons for not yet going on T.

> Hmmm. Yeah. Yeah, I think it's because I'm not ready to commit.
> And I feel like it's possible there will be a time when I want to or need
> to . . . *lay my burden down,* you know.
>
> But honestly, the reason, right now, I'm not on T,
> is because I'm doing a film project with women I've been working with,
> and I feel like I can negotiate my identity with them, and they understand my
> identity, and my identity
> is a pretty fundamental part of the ways I interact with them.
> And so I feel like I'm engaged in this project and who I am in this project is in this
> space, and then I sort of . . . I'm okay.
> And that's been a part of my life for the last five years.
> And so in some ways I'm like—well, perhaps I'm finishing up this stage in my life.
> And I can figure out what's going to work, and, who I am, after that.
>
> But, it's also tricky.
> Because I feel like the longer I stay here,
> the more I at least know what this is . . .
> at some point it becomes a pretty huge leap.
> And maybe I'm going to get to a place

where I'm like, "You know what, I understand this space
and this is where I've been living for a good fifteen years,
so this is where I'm going to stay."
    I don't necessarily see myself doing that,
but I don't know,
it's so tricky.
I just don't,
    I don't want to feel stuck. (2010)

This undefined, fluid space is complicated and exhausting, so that he wants to "lay [his] burden down"; but this is also the space that he *knows* and where he feels comfortable. Coming into one's identity is not typically a straight line from A to B, but rather a continuum of changes and experiences. The comfort of where he is appeals to Neeve, but he also does not want to "feel stuck" in this space, recognizing that, perhaps, fluidity might also create borders.

During our conversation,. I told Neeve that I had considered taking a low dose of T, enough to be read as more male, perhaps a feminine male, but I wasn't sure how my life would change if I were being read as a man full-time.

CS: Like it's not my world, I don't know if I want that to be my world,
you know.
Like I don't know if . . .
I want to be another white guy—

Totally! The whole white guy thing is huge for me!

CS: Yeah, and like how you're talking about your work. Like sometimes I think it would make things easier,
but other times like I don't want to be trapped.
    Also in this in-between.
    Like I don't know,
like going to really rural places, like I feel like *now,* like how you said you get read as the farmer's wife, or whatever,
I guess like I can fall back on that a little,
and know that I won't get my ass kicked.

Yeah, totally. Huge questions of safety.
I've definitely broken that down.
And I'm, like, okay, to be a masculine woman or be a feminine man?
Which is safer?

It's a hell of a lot safer to be a masculine woman.
And . . . to point to that, a lot of my friends who have transitioned
have gotten gay-bashed . . . It's rough. That's where I'm like,
"Y'all just keep on beating each other and I'll just stay right here.
I don't need to be proving anything in that regard."

And, your career, or your interests, or your *world* right now
as . . . a folklorist—
There are times when I try to figure out if I'm going to stay here, what can I do? And
I feel like the strengths of this identity are when I'm talking to people . . .
I take them out of their standard social scripts and they don't know how to—
they don't know exactly how to interact with me.

I'm not exactly a man, I'm not exactly a woman.

And so because of that they then interact with me like someone
they've never potentially met before,
and that brings up all these new stories, or it . . .opens them up to sharing . . .
deeper parts of themselves in a much faster way, right?
Because it's not—because they don't have a script for me,
we can sort of create our own script.

So when I'm thinking of—I love being a storyteller, I love getting into
people's deeper psychology, and love what it is that motivates them or drives
them or terrifies them or what have you, or, I love studying culture . . .
so there are times where I'm just—maybe I should just be a psychologist or
an anthropologist, and just accept
that my life's lot is that I'm going to throw people off.
But, within that throwing people off, I'm going to find what's most
interesting or intriguing about it, and just . . . work with that.

But there are other times where I'm just, like,
That's so *fucking exhausting* and I just want to have some *fun*.

[We laugh].

You know, honestly, these days when I think about transitioning,
I'm just, "oh my God, I could just go out in the world
and just have fucking fun."
But I don't know if that's true though.
Because . . . I feel like there's a whole set of anxieties with transitioning. (2010)

This segment circles back to—and expands on—earlier parts of our conversation, as we delve more deeply into our considerations of masculinity, of "passing" full-time as men, and our gender-identities' influences on our work. Both of us continually question and break

down the possibilities, wondering about which identity makes us more vulnerable, which identity is more useful, which identity is more *us*—considering our gender identities and how people perceive us. But we also realize that the question is not so black and white; the question is not "which" identity, but how we create and shape our identities.

Neeve underscores throughout his narrative how interacting with people is a defining part of his life. He feels his genderqueer identity allows him to function in the world, by impacting people in this way that may unnerve or confuse them, and that he feels sometimes opens into this space of intimacy. Yet, toward the end of this segment, as he grows more excited, he says truthfully: "I just want to have some *fun*." The constant performing, examining, wondering how others will read you, wears a person down. Neeve sees a sort of freedom with moving into a more defined gender space. This place in the conversation resonated for me, partly because of Neeve's humor and directness, but also because this made sense to me. Throughout our conversation, we found these shared moments where we reiterated and affirmed each other, but which also led us deeper into more questioning. At the end of the segment, Neeve critiques his own statement about "having fun" by addressing the fuller picture: medically transitioning brings up a different "set of anxieties"—which some of my consultants addressed in Chapter 3, when they spoke about their own experiences as being read as (straight) men.

These trans-paths are never simple. To transition is not necessarily to find a way out of a place, but to create a path that takes one closer to oneself. Stories about outsider perceptions also came up with my consultants who are medically transitioning, The diversity of my consultants' gender identities and presentations, and the ways in which they carve out these new spaces for themselves, revealed a wide range of paths and possibilities;

nonetheless, the narratives also seemed to hold each other up, illuminating, I feel, a shared sense of meaning and understanding.

Many of my consultants feel that their gender identity is too complicated for outsiders to understand just by looking at them, and that often outsider perceptions can simultaneously recognize and miss the person entirely. Or, in the same place and same moment in time, people see you with conflicting perspectives. Sometimes, people look at you through lenses that are skewed by their own memories of you, or by their misunderstanding that they "know" your gender. Trans-identified males are accustomed to moving through a complex continuum of gazes, a kind of winding tunnel where occasional glimmers of recognition help us find our way.

Chase shared a story about being read as a male, before he started T, which caused both anxiety and clarity. His father had died, and he went home for the wake and funeral.

> But anyway, so when my father died, my mother told me,
> "Now I'll let you wear pants, dress pants to the wake or whatever you call it, but you're going to have to wear one of my—because you know I don't own a dress—you're going to have to wear one of my long skirts,"—kind of like, you know, something that wouldn't make me feel as bad —
> but, "You're going to have to wear that to the funeral."
> So I went out and
> bought a men's suit.
>
> [He laughs].
>
> And I wore it, but it wasn't . . . it was a men's suit that probably could've been a woman's, it looked either way. You know, it wasn't one of the real expensive men's suits, that really really look like a man's suit.
> But—at the wake, I'm standing beside her, and this woman comes up—and this is before I started transitioning, this is 1998—
> and this woman comes up and she's telling my mom,
> "Oh Mary*, you know I'm sorry about Tom*" and blah blah blah,
> and then she looks to my mom's right, which is me, and she says, "You know I haven't been here in so many years I forgot about your kids."
> She said, "You got three of them, right? There's your two girls, and this must be your son, he looks just like Tom."
> I thought my mother was going to go through the floorboard, you know.
> So after it was over, she said, "You will wear a dress."

> And I was thinking, "They're going to think I'm in drag," you know, because I did,
> I looked [like] a bad drag queen, you know.
> But the woman, she was like, "He looks just like"—
> and I was . . . all grins from that shit, "Oh, he looks just like Tom."
> It made me feel so good,
> I thought [my mom] was going to go underneath the church.
> (2009)

For Chase, being read as male felt right, an acknowledgement of his identity in a place where his mother wanted to deny this possibility. The moment also reiterated the words of his father, who told him, before he died, "You know what, I want you to know, I couldn't ask for a better boy" (2009). His mother couldn't—or wouldn't—recognize him; in this case, though, a stranger did.

Many of my consultants say that those to whom they are closest have the most trouble "seeing" them; this is especially true with family. When I interviewed Stephen, Thanksgiving was only a few weeks away, and he was visibly anxious about going home to see his family in Tennessee:

> So now it's like we have this fucking obvious issue, change, whatever,
> that's going on in our family and nobody's going to damn talk about it.
> And I'm going to show up at Thanksgiving with, you know,
> my voice two octaves deeper
> and facial hair
> and nobody's going to fucking talk about it.
> I mean, that's just the way it is.
> Which feels crazy to me. It feels—I mean, that's hard for me. (2008)

The interview took place a year and a half ago. Stephen's parents still don't talk about his gender identity, though they acknowledge, on some level, that he is transitioning. They typically still use female pronouns and call him by his birth name. His grandmother, who is incredibly close to him, does not know at all. I went home with Stephen last year. He shaved off his sideburns, and shaved his face. But his chest was flat, his voice low. Nonetheless, his grandmother sees him absolutely as her granddaughter. We went over to her house: vacuum lines in the carpet and dishes of candy on the end tables, and pictures of Stephen, the only

grandchild, all over the house. His grandmother was putting on her lipstick. I felt nervous that I was going to screw up and call Stephen by his name or use male pronouns around her. As we were going out the door, his grandmother, smiling, looked at us and said, "I'm just so glad you girls are here." It was a surreal moment. Stephen and I glanced at each other, but said nothing. This denial of himself is painful for Stephen, but he also accepts it as part of the path, a place that inspires recognition and denial, a place where some of those to whom he is closest will never be able to fully enter.

For many of my consultants, the ways in which their families *see* them are complicated and difficult, and often wrong. Mo's parents, however, fully recognize him as Mo, and last summer, he was the best man at his brother's wedding. Mo is read consistently by friends, family, and strangers as male; nonetheless, he has a complicated understanding of his own masculinity, and feels like his understanding of his own gender identity and what it means to him often changes. Mo told me that now, as he feels more comfortable within this defined male space, he also feels more comfortable in expressing what some might consider effeminate characteristics. "I like cute things, cooking, kittens, and for a while, I thought I needed not to play that up," he said (2009). He assumes that others read him as "a flaming dude," and says that he feels fine with being read as a gay man; nonetheless, he doesn't feel that the description is completely accurate. Though he is read consistently as male, Mo feels that an important part of his identity is that he is out as "a queer person," in a sense, encouraging the gaze of others: "I don't want to retreat in this heteronormative life" (2009).

The various ways that my consultants desire to be perceived by others raises questions about how we present our identities, but also how we emerge into them, or how we come to understand them. A common theme that holds these stories together—from Stephen's desire to be seen and accepted by his grandmother, to Luke feeling that it is

important for him to hold onto some part of his female identity—concerns my consultants' overwhelming desire to be *recognized*. As we come into our identities, these expressions of ourselves ripple outward.

I can see this person now.
-Tate (2010d)

Sometimes people see us exactly as we want to be seen, sometimes they never do, and most of the time, they must be taught. Tate talked about the way that he moves through the world, being addressed as both "he" and "she," and how he negotiates this space. For the most part, Tate has faith that most people can learn to see.

> I think people can come around to that
> and obviously that's not always the case.
> But if you can get people to recognize that you are a person,
> they usually then—begrudgingly maybe, but eventually—accept
> you for who you are.
> And you know that happened at my work. I work at a very straight place.
> And Toby* was like, "This is 'Tate,' Tate goes by 'Tate' and is a 'he.'"
> And they all had to sort of struggle, but they got to know me and they love me now,
> and they wouldn't think of calling me anything but "he." (2010d)

Tate often takes on the role of an educator. He spoke at length to me about a lesbian player who had joined our football team knowing very little about trans-people, and who—by the end of the season—had learned a great deal.

> I would love to bottle that, and give it to the rest of the mainstream society.
> Being in that place of just not understanding anything, and then spending a season
> just being around genderqueer people who are not freaks, and are not scary,
> and are not going to molest your children,
> and are just being who they are.
> And then just being able to turn those thoughts in your head
> so you can refocus your eyes and say,
> "Oh, wait a minute, I get it,
> I can see this person now." (2010d)

Tate elegantly describes this moment of understanding in which a person takes the time to stop and "refocus their eyes." Tate doesn't need to change. He is fine. When people misread

him, they aren't looking correctly, they aren't seeing the person in front of them.

Throughout, Tate conveys an attitude of patience. Some people, though, never understand:

> And sometimes it takes a lot of handholding,
> and sometimes people never get there . . .
> Sometimes people can just *never* get there.
> And sometimes people are—have been there the whole time.
> I don't know what the difference is, I don't know what causes it in people,
> to be able to know that. (2010d)

Others' perceptions of a trans-person's gender identity continuously inform the trans-person's experiences; Tate realizes that as he moves through the world, he will be misread.

But this is not his issue, he has told me several times. In our first interview he told me:

> I feel like, like I see myself the way I see myself,
> which is very much a boy,
> and the friends who I love very dearly see me that way too.
> You know, Jen* is like, "Tate you're totally male to me, I can't see the girl
> in you," which is—
> bless her heart, I love her.
> And so it's just—but nobody else can.
> You know like anybody else in the world is going to see the girl.
> And I'm just like, "Fuck it, I don't care."
> You know, I'm just not one of those people . . . I'm just not bothered by it. (2009a)

When I asked him how far he would go to correct someone who was using the wrong pronoun, he said it depends:

> It depends on the attitude.
> You know like a lot of times I could just see
> that it's a cloud over their eyes and they have no concept,
> and I'm very forgiving and that's not going to bother me.
> You know, if it's not somebody who I'm going to have a regular conversation with
> or if it's somebody that's just going to come in and out of my life, I just let it go.
> But if it's anybody who I'm going to have any regular contact with, then you know,
> I am much more clear about how I identify.

He continued:

> I guess that's what it comes down to for me, it's like—
> some people who I know, that I'm close to,
> they always want to be *perceived* as male.
> . . . That is a driving force of their identity,

and for *me*, it's like—
I *know* I'm male, I know inside of me,
I'm not female,
I'm not a girl. (2009a)

Tate stresses that knowing himself, understanding his trans-identity, far outweighs the importance of others' perceptions. But he also told me over and over, in different contexts, the importance of community affirming his identity; the perception of supporters, he taught me, is much more powerful than the perception of detractors.

In a conversation we had a few months after the first interview, Tate wanted me to see that I was making progress in coming into my identity. He wanted me to realize that my perception of myself was important, but that asking for support from others affirmed my gender identity.

You're still new at this. You're a baby, you're young.
Not your age, but where you are . . .

C: I just changed my name this summer.

Yeah, this summer! (2009c)

At the time, other than a few close friends and my football teammates, I still hadn't told people to use male pronouns, although I was contemplating it. Usually I told people that I didn't have a preference. Tate shook his head.

You really need to tell them to use "he." Not "either/or."
You're a "he." Tell yourself everyday. You're a boy. . . .
    There is no question:
    you're a "he."
Anyone with eyes can see that. (2009c)

Again, sight. Recognition. He added, "That's why football has been good for you—everyone sees you as who you are" (2009c).

In my most recent recorded discussion with Tate, he took a slightly different turn when we talked about the way others' perception does or doesn't matter. He carefully,

subtly, began to separate our feelings about this issue, to show me that my path may not be the same as his.

Because *you* are in a different place than me.
Because even when you say, "Oh, well, you've had more experience with this,
you aren't as worried about the passing or whatever."
Well, that's not my experience at all.
You know. It's . . . I'm not hardly in any different position now
than I was six or seven years ago,
when I decided that I wanted to go by "Tate" and by "he." I don't have a—
I don't have that reaction of being like, "Oh god, this person—like, oh this person
called me a 'she,'" or "this person—"or "why doesn't this person see me as a man,
or as male,'" or whatever . . . I don't have that f*eeling* in the same way
that I think that you have.
That you're working through.

CS: That makes sense, like—

And not to say you're going to go down a different path.
But you're trying to figure it out, you're trying to work through it,
and you're like, "Where do I fall, like, how important are these things to me?"
And I think that's a difference. It's . . . as long as my people—
and I also have community here, this is where maybe my queer community
comes into play. I've been here for twelve years, I have a *huge* community, huge,
and my whole world is my community and they all see me as a boy.
So that's really—as long as *they* see me as a boy, I don't care what anybody else sees.
Usually. Usually I don't care.
I mean I hate the name,
I hate the 'lady,'
but it's like,
it's like the way that I hate . . . like, stepping in mud.

[We both laugh].

You know what I mean?
It's just, like, something that happens sometimes, and is uncomfortable,
and sticks to your shoes, and you're like, "uggh," but it's not—

CS: It doesn't make you feel badly about yourself?

It has NO effect on the way I feel about myself.
Like that's *their* problem. You know what I mean? And I don't carry that—
I carry that with me about as much as I do with mud on my shoe.
If they're—
I *feel* it—
but it doesn't affect. You know.
And it might make me unhappy for a minute. But it doesn't—

and then I forget about it. (2010d)

When I listen again to these conversations, I hear Tate and the others teaching me, or perhaps showing me, the possibilities of gender identities. These spaces we create invite the gaze of others, and what we do with this gaze—how this supports, or does or doesn't affect, or undermines our identities—also reveals the ways that we move through the world. Tate is also telling me, "Wait, listen to yourself, watch yourself, pay attention, and this may tell you something more about your identity." Even with the pervasive role that outsider perception plays in the ways that we understand or reveal our gender identities, personal feelings—my consultants explain—are the key to claiming one's trans-identity. The feelings lead us into ourselves, and then we swim out, into a river of possibilities and experiences.

September 26, 2009

I only caught the tail-end of the North Carolina Pride parade in Durham. I took the wrong exit, then couldn't find parking. The overcast sky threatened rain. I heard the familiar drumming and cheering, and headed toward Main Street, where crowds lined the sidewalks. I'd only ever been to Pride parades in New York City, huge parties that last for hours and spill into the streets of Greenwich Village. Here the crowds were thin but loud, people cheering and clapping as a few drag queens pranced by and threw candy. Then I saw the guys across the street. White guys, from their mid-20s to 50s, holding signs, Homosexuals Will Burn in Hell. *One wore a jacket printed with Bible verses. Another sign said* You will get AIDS and burn in Hell. *One of them held a camcorder. The happy people around them didn't seem bothered; they laughed and held hands and made faces into the camera. I'd never seen anything like that in New York. In fact, I'd only ever seen one protester—a thin, shrinking man with a comb-over, holding a tiny sign that said something about God, his words drowned out booming bass beats of the floats rolling by. Welcome to the South, I thought. I felt a renewed respect for the queer people standing up for themselves and loved ones.*

After the parade, I found Tate and we walked up to Duke's East Campus for the Festival, where people behind booths advertised LGBT organizations and churches, and sold merchandise. Rainbow flags brightened the gray sky. We walked around for a while, then Tate had to leave. I decided to stay for a little longer, even though I felt alone and unconnected. Gay men walked by me without seeing me. Lesbians glanced at me, but I looked away. It started to rain, lightly. I turned to go.

"Nice jeans. Hey, cool jeans."

I turned. Two boys were looking at me.

"Thanks." I smiled, finding it humorous that my jeans were cool enough for a couple of teenagers. I walked past a kiosk selling jewelry, and then, up a little further, the boys reappeared.

"Hey," they said.

I stood in front of them, feeling slightly unnerved, the way I do around teenagers. But these boys had their arms around each other. One was chubby and pale, a Goth kid, wearing a black T-shirt and jeans, and silver beads around his neck. His boyfriend was slight with shoulder-length, messy hair. He wore eyeliner. Their faces were still, their eyes were heavy; I wondered if they were stoned.

"Hi," I said. "Um, are you having a good time?"

"Yeah."

They studied me for a second. Then the chubby Goth kid asked, "What's your sexuality?"

I hesitated. "Um. I guess. I guess I'm bi."

"Me too. Us too. That's cool," the other said. "Um, how many guys have you been with?'

"Uh." I hesitated. The rain continued to fall softly. The boys looked at me patiently. Then the one wearing eye liner told me that he'd only been with one. "Him," he said, pointing.

The boyfriend said, "I've been with 18."

"Eighteen," I repeated. I didn't know how to respond. Lecture about safe sex? They didn't seem to be with anyone else, no adults or friends.

"How long have you guys been together?"

They told me they were boyfriends; they'd been together for a few weeks. They went to school together, in Raleigh. They were 14.

"This is cool," the slim one said. "Being here is so cool."

Then they asked me where I bought my jeans.

"Oh, I got them in New York." Here I was, 36, sharing the same style as 14 year old boys.

They told me where they bought their jeans, naming several teenager stores I admitted I'd never been to, and we discussed how skinny jeans were the coolest.

The slim one said, "Sometimes I have to get girl jeans."

"Yeah, I have that problem too," I said, recalling the last time I was in New York and I told the clerk, a beautiful gay man, that I wanted jeans like his, and he said: Honey, these are girl jeans, which threw me into a mild state of confusion.

"Honestly," the kid continued, "I just don't have the hips for guy's jeans. My ass doesn't look good."

"Right," I said. "I get that."

They looked at me, then at each other, then back at me. "Let's see," he said. "What else can we ask you?"

The chubby one, the quieter of the two, tilted his head. "What are you?"

His boyfriend rolled his eyes, but the kid continued.

"What's your sex?"

"Um. Well. I guess I'm going more by 'he.'"

"Yeah, 'he'," the other one said. "You're definitely a 'he.' You should definitely go with that. What's your name?"

"Carter."

"Carter. Carter what?"

"Carter Sickels."

"Carter Sickels," he repeated. "That sounds good. That's a good name."

I smiled. They told me their names. Then they asked me when "I knew." I wasn't sure how to answer: when I came out as gay, or when I started figuring out my gender, or when I came out as "gay" again? Either way, the age would appear ridiculously old to them. I went with the first gay coming out. I said I was around 20.

"Whoa. Really? That old?"

"How old are you now?" the Goth one asked.

I lied. I just couldn't muster saying 36. We'd bonded. They liked my jeans. Even 20 sounded ancient to them. I didn't want to break the bond. I said I was 28.

"Wow," the Goth kid said.

We only talked for a few more minutes. After I left, I played the conversation in my head over and over. I wished I had gotten their last names. Their phone numbers. Where they went to school. Who were those little angels? They displayed such confidence and fearlessness, and I had spent so much of my life feeling afraid of who I was, afraid of upsetting others. They did not make any assumptions about me. They asked me questions and I answered and they didn't ask for any more explanation. They asked me, basically, "What are you?" *It wasn't too much longer after this chance encounter that I was asking others to use male pronouns.* You're definitely a "he." You should definitely go with that. *I felt more connected to them in that span of five or ten minutes that I often felt with people my own age. Teenage boy soul mates.* That sounds good. That's a good name.

Chapter 5
Conclusion: Enjoy the Different Possibilities Out There

I didn't enter graduate school with the impression that my thesis would focus on the transgender community, and I tried several times to turn away from the project. I thought that I needed to separate my work from my personal life. But when is the work of a folklorist *not* personal? The more time I spent with transgender people in the area, the more drawn I felt to this topic as a thesis. Folklore's focus on performance, identity, community, and the everyday gave me the critical lens with which to explore the many issues my consultants raised.

I didn't know what to expect when I started taking photographs of my consultants, or even when I conducted my first interview with Stephen almost a year before I committed to the project. The work unfolded slowly; with each person who shared something with me, another door opened and pathways led into more pathways, converging, crossing over each other, and moving in new directions. My consultants opened up to me in ways that I wasn't expecting and created a kind of community, providing me with support, recognition. Also, by sharing their narratives, my consultants revealed, to me, parts of myself that I'd been unable to articulate. They invited me in and offered me a safe place to sit, for as long as necessary.

My consultants have struggled in regard to their gender identities, especially as they relate to their families; though they shared some of these struggles with me, they did not narrate stories of shame, or guilt, or sadness. Instead, they spoke about their trans-identities with confidence and happiness, dismantling the many generalizations surrounding

transgender experiences. By sharing their diverse stories, these individuals challenge a master narrative; at the same time, they also reveal commonalities that link them as a community of individuals who challenge the heteronormative gender binary and create new spaces of possibility. Throughout, I felt that we were engaged in this complex conversation that does not present a clear beginning or end, but is ongoing, prompting more questions, more stories, more possibilities.

My consultants' powerful *coming into* stories revealed both the complexities and the everyday-ness of constructing and claiming their gender identities. These stories, as well as their multiple ways of identifying themselves, conveyed the importance of recognizing their own *feelings* and underscored the importance of obtaining a *language* that provides a kind of access—this language may include presentation, naming, and performing. Although these *coming into* stories were made up of many moments, most of my consultants also pointed to a particular instance in which their sense of the *possibility* of gender opened up. Sometimes this possibility exists in the everyday: their stories about getting dressed in the morning, or making a choice about which bathroom to enter, revealed the difficulty of claiming one's gender identity, but also demonstrated the ways in which they creatively perform these gender identities. Similarly, my consultants' complex relationships to their bodies show the various ways that trans-males assert their identities on a day-to-day basis; the body, though challenging for many trans-males, also creates a space of possibility. As they move through the world in these bodies, some with fluidity, others with a more defined gender, all of my consultants also engage with, and sometimes challenge, the ever-present gaze. They are acutely aware of others' perceptions of their gender-identities, but they also demonstrate a self-awareness that, most of the time, reinforces their understanding of themselves.

The conversations with my consultants revealed diverse stories that disrupted the singular trans-narrative, but also emphasized how this group shares a world of experiences, perceptions, and visions. Their identities and masculinities are certainly diverse: some identify as male, some are comfortable identifying differently in different situations; some chose to medically transition and others have decided not to undergo surgery and/or to take T; some felt like a boy when they were children and others didn't recognize a male gender until they were adults; some identify as genderqueer; some bind; some embrace a gay male identity; some are butch; some celebrate T; and many are still figuring out their paths.

Yet even with the many differences, my consultants share an expressive world—a world of stories, everyday and marked performances—and their personal *coming into* stories extend from individual stories into the community's own emergent identity, the community's *coming into* a place of comfort, safety, and celebration. For example, by sharing their stories, they also invite others to express the diversity of identities and pass down a kind of informal teaching. Folklore encouraged me to look at this everyday expressiveness and creativity of the trans-community, to understand how trans-males construct diverse but also shared identities, and to discover worlds of meaning that have largely remained within the communities. Trans-males create an experimental community that includes face-to-face connections but also extends to the expansiveness of the Internet, where trans-males might watch YouTube videos that document the effects of T or demonstrate how to effectively bind. Both the virtual and local communities underscore the feeling that one is not alone.

The trans-community offers more than shared recognition, experiences, and language; it also offers trans-males a system of support and empowerment. All of my consultants would like to see the community strengthen, to exercise political and social power—both on a local and national level. Because although my consultants create new,

fluid, and open spaces of possibilities, there are also spaces that are much less welcoming; they still live in a narrow place that operates on a gender binary, a place in which they are not protected or supported. As transgender people fight to secure rights involving healthcare, employment, and housing, they are also looking for basic recognition and empathy.[9] When I asked my consultants what they want mainstream society to know or understand about trans-experiences, many expressed simple but poignant desires: for society to stop demonizing them, and to treat them as a human beings.

Mo said:

> I really feel like the thing I want people to know
> is that I, and everyone else trans—
> I am a person with rights, that I want to fight for.
> But also, you know, I am also a nice person
> that you would probably want to sit down and have a cup of coffee with.
> I'm not a scary, you know—I'm not a scary abomination against God.
> Which I don't believe in.
> But I think if there was a God and I was an abomination against God,
> that would be pretty messed up.
> I really feel, you know, if you don't know
> what these weird transgender people are like, then they're just confusing and
> scary . . . which is one reason I try to be out and open . . .
>
> And I'm really outspoken about what I think really needs to happen politically,
> you know, for me to be safe, for people like me to be safe.
> But it is—it is a personal issue first.
> And, I am a person.
> I deserve to be treated as a decent person. (2009b)

Mo's explanation of the personal and the political attachments to claiming transgender identities informed many of my consultants' views, inspiring discussions about mainstream perception about transgender lives, and about the need for transgender communities to challenge these perceptions. In order to create fundamental changes in society, these emergent trans-communities must be inclusive of all types of trans-identities.

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[9] *Transgender Rights* (2006), by Paisley Currah, Richard M. Juang and Shannon Price Minter, examines social, political, and legal issues for transgender people.

Neeve also viewed transgender rights as both a political and personal issue:

> You know, in terms of community,
> I come to it from a civil rights perspective.
> I mean, trans people are—you know.
> I see it happening in my life and I don't like it one bit.
> I see myself being, like, "Okay, like I'm 36 years old
> and I'm making this much money, and I'm not wanting to engage in society
> in this way, this way, and this way,
> and so that's holding me back."
> You know.
> And I see the ways that because I'm . . . inherently gender deviant,
> people place other forms of deviance on me, you know?
> Maybe they're afraid I'm . . . scary or sketchy,
> or a thief, or a liar, you know. I feel like then all of that deviance
> is sort of placed on me, and then it's my place to . . . break through all that.
> And there are times when I just don't fucking want to.
> Anyways, so I just wish that [trans]people could step outside of the nuances
> and just get to a place where we all recognize that this isn't easy. (2010)

My consultants want people to know that they are "not scary" and "not an abomination," but that they are just people, trying to live their lives in ways that feel right to them. While none of my consultants told me about a direct experience in which a person called them an abomination, for example, to their faces, they perceive this as an underlying attitude in a society that denies them rights and discourages expressions of gender identities that do not conform to the gender binary or that reveal the binary as compulsory and culturally prescribed instead of "natural."

My consultants also wish that society would recognize the ways that the gender binary dictates a social order, and would understand that gender is fluid and changeable. As trans-identified males create these identities of masculinity and new spaces of possibility, they are not walling themselves off; rather, they are *expanding* gender possibilities and inviting mainstream society *into* these spaces, or to at least peer into, these new spaces.

Despite the difficulties and struggles my consultants face, I also perceived a sense of excitement—that people were happy to identify as trans and felt liberated by the many possibilities of gender. Ryan pointed out that he sometimes resents that society "pities" him:

> I mean this isn't exactly what I want the world to know, "Don't pity me,"
> but . . . I don't know—it's funny how that's how straight, cisgendered[10] people
> think about trans, like, "Oh, it must be so hard for you, I feel so bad,
> you've had to go through the world like that."
> But then again, I don't want that to be my message because I don't want—
> just because my experience of being trans is easy,
> obviously a lot of people deal with a lot of oppression and get killed and
> there's really bad shit out there and it is really hard to be trans for tons of people
> too.
> But, yeah, just basically it would be nice if there [were] more conversations
> and different narratives, and just more—I guess just . . .
> gender being fluid, being a spectrum thing.
> I wish that people—and not just,
> these certain people are freaks—
> you know, *everybody* has a fluid gender . . .
> and everybody, *everybody*, performs gender.
> And people are just really programmed to think about gender
> in . . . a binary. (2009)

Similarly, Tate expressed his desire for people to realize they are not bound by societal gender roles or by the physicality of their own bodies:

> One thing that would be important is that gender is a lot more fluid
> than the strict "trapped in the wrong body" motif.
> Because I think that *is* true for some, but it's so much smaller than I think is
> out there.
> And so that would be huge.
> And to . . . understand not only is it this flexible, ever-changing spectrum, but that
> *anybody* could do it. Anybody can play with it.
> And people *ought* to play with it, you know.
>
> And a lot of that's tied up in roles, and behaviors and expectations:
> "Oh, women are supposed to do this."
> I always get so shocked when I go into reality, you know.
> Like I did a job interview the other day for a bookkeeping job, and it was this little
> office with all these women in it.

[10] "Cisgendered" is a fairly newly coined word that appears in the trans and queer lexicon. It means "non-transgender." The expression began as a way to "mark" the "unmarked" group; cisgender, or "non-trans" is preferred over descriptions such as "biological" or "real," which imply that trans people are not "biological," "real," or "natural."

> And they were all dressed up.
> Straight, professional, white, you know,
> middle class, female garb. Nails done, all this.
> And it would be so nice just to say, "You know you don't HAVE to do this.
> You don't."
> I feel like there is a pressure to conform, gender-wise,
> and I would love for mainstream society to know that.
> I wish that everybody could just play with it and not just on Halloween.
> And just enjoy the different possibilities out there in what they could do,
> and then also be more aware of what that experience might be like for other people.
> Like, "Don't freak out when you see me in the bathroom."
> Like, "Don't assume that I don't belong there," you know.
> To just try to step outside of that and their own prejudices and biases. (2010d)

If society dismantled heteronormativity and the gender binary, people could experience gender in new and uncontained ways; at the same time, my consultants stressed, they would empathize with and better understand trans-identified people. For this project, under the guidance of my consultants, I felt it was important for them to share their day-to-day experiences—to reveal a kind of specificity that master narratives flatten, and to express how they move through the world and claim their trans-identities. This kind of documentation of narratives may also reveal to non-transpeople some of the "truths" about trans-experiences, and perhaps shift their perceptions so that they see trans-people more fully and with more empathy, and without biases or judgments.

Changing public perception is a major topic of conversation in the trans community. Neeve's response to this shared need takes the form of a television show:

> So I play this game in my head where I'm . . . if I were to transition,
> what if I transitioned on a TV show?

He settled back into the couch, and we both laughed. But then he continued to lay out his ideas.

> And then [I'm] like, "What would that be, how would that work, what's the negotiations with the powers that be and what's acceptable in terms of television, and what kind of messages would one want to deliver to mainstream America?"
> And I think that—
>
> CS: You've thought a lot about this.

I play that game a lot.
So yeah, so actually—
I think for me, the first season of the television show would be watching a person who's gender variant but hasn't taken hormones, but is expressing
themselves as how they naturally feel themselves to be or how they naturally are and what life is like for them. . .
And there's a lot of humor there. I think.
You know, if you can look at it from that way, like all of those bathroom moments, and all of those movements where people are picking up on you
but not really knowing what the hell they're doing, who they're talking to.
But also . . . everything that's exhausting about it.
And all the ways you can be called, you can be like "he/she'd"
in a matter of minutes. And . . .
I would love to get that idea of that head-spin.
You know, what a crazy existence that is for people,
Like, what would that actually be like for someone?
What would that be like for you, if you were walking through the world
and this wasn't taken for granted?
And try to find the humor as much as possible within that.
And you know, I feel like a lot of humor is born out of being able to consider pain
in a healthy way, so I would love for the confusion and the pain
of what it is to never know how you're going to be read in a certain situation
and how people place so much upon you, given the ways that they read you.
And I think in some ways that could be liberating for mainstream society, right?
I *want* mainstream society to totally think about gender,
and what they're putting on and why they're putting it on, and *free* themselves
. . . I think that will come with future generations . . .

And then I think from there,
if the character were to transition,
recognizing what transitioning is—
is a way to make life easier for somebody,
is a way to relieve the burden of gender . . .
And how that's a gift that society should be willing to give people.
A gift that health insurance should cover, whether it's a public option or not, you know.
And that it's not—also, that it's not about,
"it's freaky and it's eccentric,"
but "it's a piece of our human history
and it's always existed."
And so how are we going to cope with it in a way
that's graceful and loving and accepting of humanity? (2010)

Neeve eloquently expresses something that I think most trans-identified people want society to know and understand about their trans-experiences, which are freeing rather than tragic.

Being transgender is not a disease, a problem, or something that needs to be fixed; instead, it is another way of being. If people construct and claim their transgender identities, as Neeve says, with the support of a society that is "graceful and loving and accepting of humanity," then we as society are also liberating ourselves, and perhaps deepening the possibilities of human connections.

I didn't know what to expect when I started this project. But what I found was a community of kind, courageous, open-minded people, who invited me into their lives. They shared with me their experiences and taught me much about myself. They are more articulate in ways that I can only hope to be, and so I leave the last words with Neeve, which are not actually the *last* words, but words that invite us to continue the conversation:

> *So I guess beyond that, ideally what I'd like*
> *for mainstream society to figure out is that*
> *transpeople have figured a lot out and know a lot about the way the world works.*
> *And are privy to that information, and in essence,*
> *are probably a hell of a lot wiser than most—*
> *than your average person is. Right?*
> *And so, you know, to reclaim some of our history as being people*
> *who have insights to offer, and have a particular sort of wisdom.* (2010)

Appendix I
Biographies and Photographs

Chase, 45, grew up in Eureka, North Carolina. He lives in Chapel Hill, and is currently getting a degree in Social Work at North Carolina Central University, where he will attend graduate school in the fall. From the time he was a kid, Chase told his parents that he "wanted to be a boy," and he began to seriously consider his gender identity five years ago, when he was living in Germany with his partner at the time. He started testosterone in 2008, and still plans to have chest reconstruction surgery. Chase has held several different jobs, including working as an EMT an as a guard at a women's prison. Now he hopes to go into social work to work with the LGBT community.

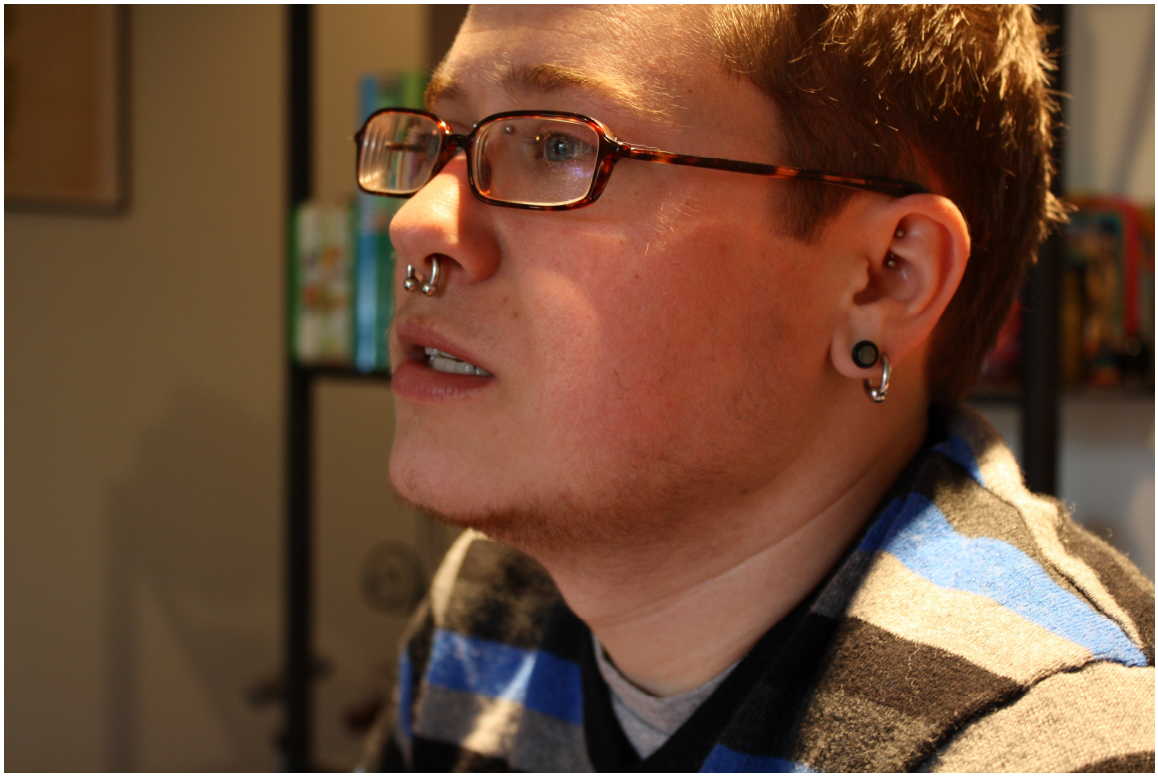
Chase feels comfortable telling people with whom he is close that he is transgender, but he also practices caution in disclosing: "Look, I would love to be out, I would love to be out. But I don't think the world is ready for me" (2009). He has no regrets about transitioning, except that he didn't start sooner.

> At my age, I'm 45, the only thing I'm envious of is the fact that I waited so long to transition, but I don't think I could have transitioned earlier because I had too much influence from my family. My mother especially. It took a long—it was hard. She pulled me back so much. But I'm envious of that. I'd love to be like 20 years younger.
>
> CS: But it was different you know, even 10 years ago
>
> Some people did it anyway [low voice]. What about the forerunners? I mean, it's like—why couldn't I have been one of those? Scared. FEAR. Fear. Fear. It's like—at some point you just have to let go of fear. I mean, in order to do this, you just have to say there is nothing to fear anymore. (2009)

Chase. Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Luke, 27, grew up near Cocoa Beach, Florida, and came to Chapel Hill to attend the University of North Carolina, where he majored in Journalism & Mass Communication. Luke now lives in Durham with several roommates. For pay, he does bookkeeping and administrative work at an accounting firm focused exclusively on nonprofit organizations. He is also passionate about oral history, working for social justice, and reclaiming spirit spaces. Of all my consultants, Luke presents as the most gender-fluid and feels it is important to challenge the gender binary and heteronormative society. I asked Luke to expand on how she felt when she began to present as more masculine: "So, yeah, I had long hair, and sometimes I'd wear skirts, although I wasn't really that into it. and didn't really have a concept that I could be anything different from that, that it was a possibility. And so that was what really blew my mind, was when I came out—it was just like opening this whole kind of world of possibilities" (2010).

Mo, 27, lives in Carrboro with his partner and two cats, and is a manager of an independent pet supply store. Mo grew up in a suburb of Nashville, and moved to Chapel Hill to attend the University of North Carolina. While Mo was in college, around 2002, he began questioning his heterosexuality and gender and told me that he started "settling into a trans male identity early in 2005 . . . but there was never a clear light-bulb moment for me when everything fell into place." Mo started testosterone in June 2005, and underwent chest reconstruction in 2007. He enjoys being read as male, but also considers his views to incorporate a genderqueer philosophy, and believes in gender as fluid and open: "I think my views of my masculine identity and what it means to me to be a trans guy who refuses to think of himself as a trans 'man' are always changing and evolving" (2009b). Mo's parents are supportive, and last year, he was the best man at his brother's wedding.



Mo. Carrboro, North Carolina

Neeve, 36, is from Milwaukee, Wisconsin and lived for five years in New York City before he moved to North Carolina in 2002. For the past five years, Neeve has been a Research Associate with the UNC School of Nursing working in HIV prevention with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women. He lives surrounded by his dog Hannah Poplar, his cat Little Man Zinn and many loving neighbors in Bynum, an artsy mill town outside of Chapel Hill on the Haw River. Neeve is dedicated to the study of yoga and recently went to India for a six-week intensive in therapeutic yoga.

Neeve identifies as genderqueer and as trans-male. He frequently considers transitioning medically, although he also finds intrigue and comfort in the positionality of his current identity as it allows for heightened fluidity and creates opportunity to bridge experiential divides.

> What's most helpful for me, is because I never know how someone's going to read me, I've stopped necessarily considering myself one way or another. What I consider myself is outside of traditional definitions of sex and gender, and so I like to think of myself as. . . an entity walking through the world. And what I'm looking to accomplish as I'm walking through the world is to be able to connect to people, and to relate to people, and also in some ways [to] study people from this position. (2010)

Neeve's gender identity influences how he sees the world, and how others see him.

> And so I guess that's how I think of myself—I really try to think of myself in the moment. And I try to—occasionally check myself: "okay Neevel, this is challenging for people, you are a challenge for people." And [I] try to just walk through the world not feeling uncomfortable. (2010)

Neeve. Haw River, Bynum, North Carolina

Ryan, 29, graduated from UNC in 2004, majoring in psychology and recreation. He grew up in a small town outside of Charlotte, N.C., and identifies as Southern. Ryan now lives in Durham with his partner, and currently is carrying out a year-long, grant-funded project through a non-profit that promotes leadership for youth with disabilities. The work he has done for people with disabilities has been an important part of his life. When Ryan was around 22, he joined the Cuntry Kings, a drag king troupe in Durham, and began performing male characters on stage. While he was performing, others in the troupe began to use male pronouns with him; this practice eventually expanded into his workplace and among his other friends. At this point, Ryan is unsure if he will go on testosterone, though he feels strongly that he will not have top surgery. Ryan prefers male pronouns and identifies as male, but sees gender as fluid, and feels strongly that it is important for trans-people to share their personal experiences:

> I just think that gender is a fluid thing, and it also relates to why I'm not sure about T . . . because . . . it's almost as I was becoming more, or identifying more as trans, I think—I think the reason people perceive me more as trans wasn't just because I was binding. . . [I was also] naturally putting out . . . a male identity. . . I think it's the same body, it's just a fluid gender within my body . . . But I also think that tons of people fit all along the gender spectrum and it's not just a black and white thing. (2009)

Ryan. Durham, North Carolina

Stephen, 31, is a social worker who graduated from the University of Chapel Hill in 2009. He grew up in Johnson City, Tennessee, a place to which he feels deeply rooted. Stephen began to think about transitioning in college, but felt that he wasn't ready to seriously consider it. Later, he thought that he would never be able to transition while his grandmother, to whom he is extremely close, was alive. But in early 2008, after much deliberation, he began testosterone, and then had chest reconstruction surgery in a few months later. He feels that his decision to transition was a gradual process: "Everything just sort of came together, and it made sense" (2008).

He told me when he began to go by Stephen and using male pronouns that he felt closer to understanding himself:

> [My partner at the time] was the first person who knew me as Stephen and consistently used male pronouns. It's a little funny at first—you have to kind of get used to it yourself. But it was awesome. . . It was sort of the same feeling that I had after I had surgery. After you have surgery you still have to wear a binder for a month after you have surgery . . . And the first time I didn't have to wear a binder anymore . . . I just went outside without my shirt on and it's sort of the same feeling: it's just incredible and it just feels right. People ask me how you know. I don't know. It just feels right.

Tate, 32, moved from Massachusetts to Hoke County, North Carolina, when he was a kid. He grew up in Raeford and attended one of the poorest schools in the state, where he played for a season on the men's wrestling team. He moved to UNC for college and settled in the area. Last summer, he hiked the Appalachian Trail, and at the end of his journey he hitchhiked from Virginia to New York, catching rides with truckers. His most recent job was delivering coffee to wholesalers; now, in the summer of 2010, he is continuing his adventure hiking the Appalachian Trail. Next year he plans to apply to law school.

Tate identifies as a boy, and only uses male pronouns to describe himself. He has chosen not to go on testosterone or undergo surgery. He likes to be challenged and pushed to think about gender in new ways:

> I think because I am genderqueer but not male transitioned, I am in a place of incredible openness and incredible—like I can have this body that's very female and this voice that's very female, and have the whole world see me as female, and still feel very male–identified and feel very comfortable in my male identity among my friends. And that has a HUGE effect on how I interact with other people. (2010d)

But he also clarified that being trans/genderqueer is only one facet of his identity:

> There's no way I can separate out my gender identity from my class identity, or my race. You know, those particularly, those three things—gender, class , race, and also sense of place, the southern—those four things are so cohesive that . . . all affect my experience. (2010d)

Tate describes himself as a country boy who considers the South as his true home and an integral part of his identity. "I totally identity as Southern—going fishing, drinking beer, sitting on a porch, good country cooking, openness" (2009b). Community is crucial to Tate.

I went to Tate's house for Thanksgiving dinner, which he insisted on cooking solo for about 25 people.

Tate. Haw River, Saxapahaw, North Carolina

Appendix II
Flag Football: A Conversation with Tate

Late summer and early fall of 2009, I played in a Durham-based flag football league, technically a "women's league." Tate was the coach. Some of the team knew each other from the year before, but many new players, including myself, had joined the team. We had around 14 players, though the core team, those who showed up regularly, consisted of about eight. The year before, the team hadn't had any wins, but this season, we won the first game of the season, and by the end, held a decent record of half wins, half losses. We played on Saturdays mornings and practiced once a week. I looked forward to each game, every practice. Tate had told me before that he recognized that many of his players relied on the games almost as a kind of therapy, something in their lives that made sense.

Except for Tate, Ryan, and myself, everyone else on the team identified as female. But at every practice, Tate instructed us to introduce ourselves to each other, which included telling others our pronoun preference. For the past couple of months, I'd been informing friends about my name change, but it was on the football field where I heard my name spoken regularly, over and over, and I realized one day how right the name felt, how strange it would sound if my teammates were shouting my birth name. I also began using male pronouns on the football field. Tate, and the team, helped make all of this possible.

During our most recent conversation, I asked Tate to talk about his role as coach, and why he felt it was important to make gender identity such a regular part of the team's dialogue. I relay this segment of the recording nearly in its entirety because it touches on many issues that this project focuses on, including outsider perceptions, community support, identity construction and performance, and the diversity of masculinities. I do not provide direct interpretation or commentary about this conversation, which I feel would only detract from the power of Tate's words; but I do weave my own memories throughout the dialogue,

both to provide contextual details and to show how I found personal meaning in this experience. The football field, in a sense, represents this uncontained space, this space of possibilities.

February 4, 2010

T: Yeah, it's a totally microcosm community. Yeah and what's nice about the football team is that it pulled from all kinds of parts of—of the area, and lots of people that didn't know each other. Well, you know with the football team, as the coach, as someone who is organizing the football team, who is trans-identified, it was already—I *love* football, and because I love football I am willing to overlook some serious flaws in the program, i.e. that it's a woman's flag football league.

And that's really a driving force. It's . . . a women's-identified flag football league in a fairly conservative town/program, you know, where the refs are open to the *queerness* of it but are still very predisposed to the *gender* of it. You know, calling people "ladies," and . . . same with the other teams. Like the other teams calling each other "ladies" and saying really fucked up sexist things even amongst themselves. Even if they were queer. Or saying homophobic things, like, calling their team members things. . . [one team] called the bi girl "shifty." Yeah, called their bisexual-identified teammate "shifty." Which is insulting as opposed to supportive.

And that is *not* my way. I am incredibly supportive of anybody who wants to explore their gender, and because it was—I felt like I had to be reactionary to the straight genderness of the league. And the only way that I was going to enjoy that was if I could *redefine* in my little world, my football team, what this means. And so I acknowledge straight off that it's a "woman's football team" or "woman's football league." And then I liked to make a joke and be like, "Obviously they haven't figured it out yet. Our team is *not* a woman's football team, it's a *queer* football team." And even then, because we had straight people on the team, you know "queer" being broad enough to incorporate straight folks as well.

Our first practice takes place on a hot, still August evening at a park in Carrboro. Before we even run a lap around the field, we are dripping with sweat. Tate gathers us in a circle. He wears baggy shorts and a T-shirt, tube socks, football cleats, and ball cap. A whistle drapes from his neck. He carries a clipboard. He welcomes us, introduces himself, and begins: 'This is a ***queer*** *football team."*

CS: I remember you said that like the first day—

Yeah, and laid it out and said that. That way people can know or not whether they want to be on it. And there's some people from the year before who are trans-identified who could do it last year who couldn't do this year, who were just like, "No, I just feel like I am too trans-identified on the masculine scale to handle other teams seeing me as a female-bodied person." And that, you know, that's just the way it is. And particularly, regardless if you transitioned—so as a coach that was really important to set up right at the beginning. And it's important for me, and so I need for them to know how to refer to me, how to never call

me "ma'am," to ever refer to me as a female-bodied person, or that would be very disrespectful. I would consider that disrespectful.

And it's—and people, you know—it's really when you have control of your own world, I get really excited. I like that, you know, because I feel like if I ever teach I'm going to do that as well. You know, say, 'You know, this is how it is, you know, in my world, we do *not* assume anybody's pronoun, this is how this gendered thing should work, always, regardless of how some body presents." Because you know Ivan* totally would present as female, and loves to dress in female drag: "Even in female drag, even when I'm dressed to the nines, I want to be identified as a boy." And I'm like, "By all means." That's a very hard thing for people to understand, like that's a different kind of complication.

So anyhow, if I have control over it, then I'm going to say—and I wish I could do it with a lot of other things, and I'm just not advanced enough to really go there. But certainly with the gender. And then it's really exciting to watch people. Well it's really interesting because you know there were days when I was the only person, and you were the only person and before you were saying—

CS: He or she.

T: Yeah, right. Because you were saying "he or she" right from the beginning I think.

CS: I said "he or she" the first couple of times.

At the start of each practice, after one lap around the field, we circle up to stretch. First, someone leads us in jumping jacks. Then, after we complete a series of stretches, we go around the circle and introduce ourselves. Name, pronoun preference, and a favorite (favorite ice cream, favorite vegetable, etc). We do this almost every week, even though after a few practices, we all know each other. "I'm Tate, and I go by 'he,'" Tate starts us off. The first night of practice, I say, "He or she." I realize this is the only time I've introduced myself this way to non-trans folks. A few weeks later, without thinking too deeply about it, I say, "He." No one pauses. Introductions continue. From then on, whenever someone on the team refers to me, they use male pronouns.

T: Right and then you switched. And then I said, "If you want to switch any time—"

CS: I remember you told me, "If you want to switch, but then you can always switch back,"

T: Right.

CS: Or the next day, If you want to be called "she," or whatever,

T: Whatever, yeah.

CS: That was really liberating for myself.

T: And I think it helped, it wasn't like we only did your name and your pronoun and your favorite ice cream on the first day or second day, we did it for *weeks*. Until well until three quarters into the practices, as a way, as a continuous way of support . . . at any point you could change your pronoun. And people did! You know like you did, and Ivan* did.

CS: Also for me it was really like using my name a lot, because I'd just started that a couple of months before.

T: And having support.

CS: And having people say "he."

T: And then being able wear little shorty booty shorts.

CS: Exactly.

(We both laugh).

I show up to our first game, on a bright Saturday morning, wearing a bandana tied around my head, red wrist bands, and tube socks with red stripes, and I jog up to Tate. He just shakes his head: "Carter, I swear, you just get more and more gay every time I see you." Not long after that, I arrive to practice wearing black short shorts, something I would have not have done before because I was afraid of appearing "girlish." Though not a lot has changed about my outside appearance, I feel different, more myself, comfortable.

CS: Which I never would have been able to wear, you know, two years ago.

T: No, no.

CS: I would have been freaked out by that.

T: Totally. You know. And how much better do you feel you know—

CS: Because I felt like that was more *me*—

T: Yeah, and when you have—as a coach, the highlight of my football season, besides winning that first game—

(I laugh)

—the highlight is when *I know* that my players feel comfortable with their gender presentation on my football team. When they are getting validated in way they don't validated in any other part of their life. You know. And that's *huge.* And that's a huge part of it. So even if it's one or two people out of a 20 person team, I mean, that's such a difference. But it makes the other people, even the lesbians, even—you know what I always thought was funny is [how] we go around and a lot of the female-identified people are, like, really awkward when [they say], "My name is, you know, whoever, and I prefer 'she.'" And it's almost like, "*Of course* I prefer 'she,'" you know. But it forced them to say it over and over again, like it forced them to think about it in a way that they've NEVER had to think about it before because that's their privilege, just like I don't have to think about my race privilege, as a white person, because that's the dominant, that's the privileged race. And so . . . when you as a female-bodied person are like, "Oh, this is what it might feel like for a trans-identified person to have to always be validated, to have to always be saying, *No, I prefer 'he,'*

I prefer 'he.'" That's a big deal. So it's really beneficial, not just for the transfolks on the team but also for the non-trans folks on the team.

CS: Yeah, and I'm sure like some of those people, women, had never, like, were probably surprised by that.

T: Yeah.

CS: When we went around the circle and said our name, yeah.

T: Yeah and I think they didn't quite know what to do with it, and they were like—they picked up. You know. And I think they got into it, but it was definitely, I think it was REALLY surprising for some people. And it was really exciting for other people.

CS: This is making me excited for football.

(We both laugh and spend time reminiscing about our first win, and then Tate returns to the topic of gender identity and the importance of community.)

T: The thing about that I liked too . . . I liked the intimacy and the bonding. I felt like it help us create a connection to each other. You know, in a way when we went to face the other teams, to say, you know, we support each other: "I support Carter, I support Ryan, I support Tate." You know, as a feeling—if they said, "Oh lady, oh that girl," then you could turn around and someone on your team's going to say, "Oh that Carter, *he's* looking real good today in his booty shorts."

(We laugh).

T: You know, you had that support, like it didn't feel—you know. And that's a really good example of how my trans identity fits into the larger circle. It's the same thing. My football team, my community. It's . . . to have that validation erases, it's like a white-out of—like a snow blizzard of some sort that just muffles all the bullshit that other people might be thinking or feeling. Because *I* feel the love and I feel the support from my people.

Revisiting this conversation makes me happy. I remember how freeing the experience felt, and how *easy* it was, to claim my gender identity. Tate's open-mindedness, support, and generosity led the team into creating a community that validated our identities. He gave us a space that some of us could not find out in the world. On a daily basis, outsiders, family, maybe even friends use the wrong name, the wrong pronoun. But here we claimed and redefined this space, so that, as Tate said, the support "muffles all the bullshit that other people might be thinking or feeling."

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